



Guthrie Christie



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AGATHA CHRISTIE

Collected Works



AGATHA CHRISTIE

The Big Four

Murder in Mesopotamia



HERON BOOKS

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Illustrations © Editio-Service S.A., Geneva, 1977; 1975*

*Original Illustrations by
ALES JIRANEK &
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*Printed in England by
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited
Aylesbury, Bucks*

The Big Four

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CHAPTER I

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

I HAVE met people who enjoy a channel crossing ; men who can sit calmly in their deck-chairs and, on arrival, wait until the boat is moored, then gather their belongings together without fuss and disembark. Personally, I can never manage this. From the moment I get on board I feel that the time is too short to settle down to anything. I move my suit-cases from one spot to another, and if I go down to the saloon for a meal, I bolt my food with an uneasy feeling that the boat may arrive unexpectedly whilst I am below. Perhaps all this is merely a legacy from one's short leaves in the war, when it seemed a matter of such importance to secure a place near the gangway, and to be amongst the first to disembark lest one should waste precious minutes of one's three or five days' leave.

On this particular July morning, as I stood by the rail and watched the white cliffs of Dover drawing nearer, I marvelled at the passengers who could sit calmly in their chairs and never

even raise their eyes for the first sight of their native land. Yet perhaps their case was different from mine. Doubtless many of them had only crossed to Paris for the week-end, whereas I had spent the last year and a half on a ranch in the Argentine. I had prospered there, and my wife and I had both enjoyed the free and easy life of the South American continent, nevertheless it was with a lump in my throat that I watched the familiar shore draw nearer and nearer.

I had landed in France two days before, transacted some necessary business, and was now *en route* for London. I should be there some months—time enough to look up old friends, and one old friend in particular. A little man with an egg-shaped head and green eyes—Hercule Poirot ! I proposed to take him completely by surprise. My last letter from the Argentine had given no hint of my intended voyage—indeed, that had been decided upon hurriedly as a result of certain business complications—and I spent many amused moments picturing to myself his delight and stupefaction on beholding me.

He, I knew, was not likely to be far from his headquarters. The time when his cases had drawn him from one end of England to the

other was past. His fame had spread, and no longer would he allow one case to absorb all his time. He aimed more and more, as time went on, at being considered a "consulting detective"—as much a specialist as a Harley Street physician. He had always scoffed at the popular idea of the human bloodhound who assumed wonderful disguises to track criminals, and who paused at every footprint to measure it.

"No, my friend Hastings," he would say ; "we leave that to Giraud and his friends. Hercule Poirot's methods are his own. Order and method, and 'the little gray cells.' Sitting at ease in our own arm-chairs we see the things that these others overlook, and we do not jump to the conclusion like the worthy Japp."

No ; there was little fear of finding Hercule Poirot far afield.

On arrival in London, I deposited my luggage at an hotel and drove straight on to the old address. What poignant memories it brought back to me ! I hardly waited to greet my old landlady, but hurried up the stairs two at a time and rapped on Poirot's door.

"Enter, then," cried a familiar voice from within.

I strode in. Poirot stood facing me. In his

arms he carried a small valise, which he dropped with a crash on beholding me.

"*Mon ami*, Hastings!" he cried. "*Mon ami*, Hastings!"

And, rushing forward, he enveloped me in a capacious embrace. Our conversation was incoherent and inconsequent. Ejaculations, eager questions, incomplete answers, messages from my wife, explanations as to my journey, were all jumbled up together.

"I suppose there's some one in my old rooms?" I asked at last, when we had calmed down somewhat. "I'd love to put up here again with you."

Poirot's face changed with startling suddenness.

"*Mon Dieu!* but what a *chance épouvantable*. Regard around you, my friend."

For the first time I took note of my surroundings. Against the wall stood a vast ark of a trunk of prehistoric design. Near to it were placed a number of suit-cases, ranged neatly in order of size from large to small. The inference was unmistakable.

"You are going away?"

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"South America."

"*What?*"

"Yes, it is a droll farce, is it not? It is to Rio I go, and every day I say to myself, I will write nothing in my letters—but oh! the surprise of the good Hastings when he beholds me!"

"But when are you going?"

Poirot looked at his watch.

"In an hour's time."

"I thought you always said nothing would induce you to make a long sea voyage?"

Poirot closed his eyes and shuddered.

"Speak not of it to me, my friend. My doctor, he assures me that one dies not of it—and it is for the one time only; you understand, that never—never shall I return."

He pushed me into a chair.

"Come, I will tell you how it all came about. Do you know who is the richest man in the world? Richer even than Rockefeller? Abe Ryland."

"The American Soap King?"

"Precisely. One of his secretaries approached me. There is some very considerable, as you would call it, hocus-pocus going on in connection with a big company in Rio. He wished me to investigate matters on the spot. I refused. I told him that if the facts were laid before me, I would give him my expert opinion. But that he professed himself unable to do. I was to be

put in possession of the facts only on my arrival out there. Normally, that would have closed the matter. To dictate to Hercule Poirot is sheer impertinence. But the sum offered was so stupendous that for the first time in my life I was tempted by mere money. It was a competence—a fortune! And there was a second attraction—*you*, my friend. For this last year and a half I have been a very lonely old man. I thought to myself, Why not? I am beginning to weary of this unending solving of foolish problems. I have achieved sufficient fame. Let me take this money and settle down somewhere near my old friend.”

I was quite affected by this token of Poirot's regard.

“So I accepted,” he continued, “and in an hour's time I must leave to catch the boat train. One of life's little ironies, is it not? But I will admit to you, Hastings, that had not the money offered been so big, I might have hesitated, for just lately I have begun a little investigation of my own. Tell me, what is commonly meant by the phrase, ‘The Big Four’?”

“I suppose it had its origin at the Versailles Conference, and then there's the famous ‘Big Four’ in the film world, and the term is used by hosts of smaller fry.”

"I see," said Poirot thoughtfully. "I have come across the phrase, you understand, under certain circumstances where none of those explanations would apply. It seems to refer to a gang of international criminals or something of that kind ; only——"

"Only what?" I asked, as he hesitated.

"Only that I fancy that it is something on a large scale. Just a little idea of mine, nothing more. Ah, but I must complete my packing. The time advances."

"Don't go," I urged. "Cancel your passage and come out on the same boat with me."

Poirot drew himself up and glanced at me reproachfully.

"Ah, it is that you do not understand! I have passed my word, you comprehend—the word of Hercule Poirot. Nothing but a matter of life or death could detain me now."

"And that's not likely to occur," I murmured ruefully. "Unless at the eleventh hour 'the door opens and the unexpected guest comes in.'"

I quoted the old saw with a slight laugh, and then, in the pause that succeeded it, we both started as a sound came from the inner room.

"What's that?" I cried.

"*Ma foi!*" retorted Poirot. "It sounds very like your 'unexpected guest' in my bedroom."

"But how can any one be in there? There's no door except into this room."

"Your memory is excellent, Hastings. Now for the deductions."

"The window! But it's a burglar, then? He must have had a stiff climb of it—I should say it was almost impossible."

I had risen to my feet and was striding in the direction of the door when the sound of a fumbling at the handle from the other side arrested me.

The door swung slowly open. Framed in the doorway stood a man. He was coated from head to foot with dust and mud; his face was thin and emaciated. He stared at us for a moment, and then swayed and fell. Poirot hurried to his side, then he looked up and spoke to me.

"Brandy—quickly."

I dashed some brandy into a glass and brought it. Poirot managed to administer a little, and together we raised him and carried him to the couch. In a few minutes he opened his eyes and looked round him with an almost vacant stare.

"What is it you want, monsieur?" said Poirot.

The man opened his lips and spoke in a queer mechanical voice.

"M. Hercule Poirot, 14 Faraway Street."

"Yes, yes; I am he."

The man did not seem to understand, and merely repeated in exactly the same tone :—

“ M. Hercule Poirot, 14 Farraway Street.”

Poirot tried him with several questions. Sometimes the man did not answer at all ; sometimes he repeated the same phrase. Poirot made a sign to me to ring up on the telephone.

“ Get Dr. Ridgeway to come round.”

The doctor was in luckily ; and as his house was only just round the corner, few minutes elapsed before he came bustling in.

“ What’s all this, eh ? ”

Poirot gave a brief explanation, and the doctor started examining our strange visitor, who seemed quite unconscious of his presence or ours.

“ H’m ! ” said Dr. Ridgeway, when he had finished. “ Curious case.”

“ Brain fever ? ” I suggested.

The doctor immediately snorted with contempt.

“ Brain fever ! Brain fever ! No such thing as brain fever. An invention of novelists. No ; the man’s had a shock of some kind. He’s come here under the force of a persistent idea—to find M. Hercule Poirot, 14 Farraway Street—and he repeats those words mechanically without in the least knowing what they mean.”

"Aphasia?" I said eagerly.

This suggestion did not cause the doctor to snort quite as violently as my last one had done. He made no answer, but handed the man a sheet of paper and a pencil.

"Let's see what he'll do with that," he remarked.

The man did nothing with it for some moments, then he suddenly began to write feverishly. With equal suddenness he stopped and let both paper and pencil fall to the ground. The doctor picked it up, and shook his head.

"Nothing here. Only the figure 4 scrawled a dozen times, each one bigger than the last. Wants to write 14 Faraway Street, I expect. It's an interesting case—very interesting. Can you possibly keep him here until this afternoon? I'm due at the hospital now, but I'll come back this afternoon and make all arrangements about him. It's too interesting a case to be lost sight of."

I explained Poirot's departure and the fact that I proposed to accompany him to Southampton.

"That's all right. Leave the man here. He won't get into mischief. He's suffering from complete exhaustion. Will probably sleep for eight hours on end. I'll have a word with that

excellent Mrs. Funnyface of yours, and tell her to keep an eye on him."

And Dr. Ridgeway bustled out with his usual celerity. Poirot hastily completed his packing, with one eye on the clock.

"The time, it marches with a rapidity unbelievable. Come now, Hastings, you cannot say that I have left you with nothing to do. A most sensational problem. The man from the unknown. Who is he? What is he? Ah, *sapristi*, but I would give two years of my life to have this boat go to-morrow instead of to-day. There is something here very curious—very interesting. But one must have time—*time*. It may be days—or even months—before he will be able to tell us what he came to tell."

"I'll do my best, Poirot," I assured him. "I'll try to be an efficient substitute."

"Ye-es."

His rejoinder struck me as being a shade doubtful. I picked up the sheet of paper.

"If I were writing a story," I said lightly, "I should weave this in with your latest idiosyncrasy and call it *The Mystery of the Big Four*." I tapped the pencilled figures as I spoke.

And then I started, for our invalid, roused suddenly from his stupor, sat up in his chair and said clearly and distinctly :—

“Li Chang Yen.”

He had the look of a man suddenly awakened from sleep. Poirot made a sign to me not to speak. The man went on. He spoke in a clear, high voice, and something in his enunciation made me feel that he was quoting from some written report or lecture.

“Li Chang Yen may be regarded as representing the brains of the Big Four. He is the controlling and motive force. I have designated him, therefore, as Number One. Number Two is seldom mentioned by name. He is represented by an ‘S’ with two lines through it—the sign for a dollar; also by two stripes and a star. It may be conjectured, therefore, that he is an American subject, and that he represents the power of wealth. There seems no doubt that Number Three is a woman, and her nationality French. It is possible that she may be one of the sirens of the *demi-monde*, but nothing is known definitely. Number Four——”

His voice faltered and broke. Poirot leant forward.

“Yes,” he prompted eagerly. “Number Four?”

His eyes were fastened on the man’s face. Some overmastering terror seemed to be gaining the day; the features were distorted and twisted.

"*The destroyer*," gasped the man. Then, with a final convulsed movement, he fell back in a dead faint.

"*Mon Dieu !*" whispered Poirot, "I was right then. I was right."

"You think——?"

He interrupted me.

"Carry him on to the bed in my room. I have not a minute to lose if I would catch my train. Not that I want to catch it. Oh, that I could miss it with a clear conscience! But I gave my word. Come, Hastings!"

Leaving our mysterious visitor in the charge of Mrs. Pearson, we drove away, and duly caught the train by the skin of our teeth. Poirot was alternately silent and loquacious. He would sit staring out of the window like a man lost in a dream, apparently not hearing a word that I said to him. Then, reverting to animation suddenly, he would shower injunctions and commands upon me, and urge the necessity of constant marconigrams.

We had a long fit of silence just after we passed Woking. The train, of course, did not stop anywhere until Southampton; but just here it happened to be held up by a signal.

"Ah! *Sacré mille tonnerres !*" cried Poirot suddenly. "But I have been an imbecile. I

see clearly at last. It is undoubtedly the blessed saints who stopped the train. Jump, Hastings, but jump, I tell you."

In an instant he had unfastened the carriage door, and jumped out on the line.

"Throw out the suit-cases and jump yourself."

I obeyed him. Just in time. As I alighted beside him, the train moved on.

"And now Poirot," I said, in some exasperation, "perhaps you will tell me what all this is about."

"It is, my friend, that I have seen the light."

"That," I said, "is very illuminating to me."

"It should be," said Poirot, "but I fear—I very much fear that it is not. If you can carry two of these valises, I think I can manage the rest."

CHAPTER II

THE MAN FROM THE ASYLUM

FORTUNATELY the train had stopped near a station. A short walk brought us to a garage where we were able to obtain a car, and half an hour later we were spinning rapidly back to London. Then, and not till then, did Poirot deign to satisfy my curiosity.

"You do not see? No more did I. But I see now. Hastings, *I was being got out of the way.*"

"What!"

"Yes. Very cleverly. Both the place and the method were chosen with great knowledge and acumen. They were afraid of me."

"Who were?"

"Those four geniuses who have banded themselves together to work outside the law. A Chinaman, an American, a Frenchwoman, and —another. Pray the good God we arrive back in time, Hastings."

"You think there is danger to our visitor?"

"I am sure of it."

Mrs. Pearson greeted us on arrival. Brushing

aside her ecstasies of astonishment on beholding Poirot, we asked for information. It was reassuring. No one had called, and our guest had not made any sign.

With a sigh of relief we went up to the rooms. Poirot crossed the outer one and went through to the inner one. Then he called me, his voice strangely agitated.

“Hastings, he’s dead.”

I came running to join him. The man was lying as we had left him, but he was dead, and had been dead some time. I rushed out for a doctor. Ridgeway, I knew, would not have returned yet. I found one almost immediately, and brought him back with me.

“He’s dead right enough, poor chap. Tramp you’ve been befriending, eh?”

“Something of the kind,” said Poirot evasively.

“What was the cause of death, doctor?”

“Hard to say. Might have been some kind of fit. There are signs of asphyxiation. No gas laid on, is there?”

“No, electric light—nothing else.”

“And both windows wide open, too. Been dead about two hours, I should say. You’ll notify the proper people, won’t you?”

He took his departure. Poirot did some necessary telephoning. Finally, somewhat to my

surprise, he rang up our old friend Inspector Japp, and asked him if he could possibly come round.

No sooner were these proceedings completed than Mrs. Pearson appeared, her eyes as round as saucers.

"There's a man here from 'Anwell—from the 'Sylum. Did you ever? Shall I show him up?"

We signified assent, and a big burly man in uniform was ushered in.

"'Morning, gentlemen," he said cheerfully. "I've got reason to believe you've got one of my birds here. Escaped last night, he did."

"He *was* here," said Poirot quietly.

"Not got away again, has he?" asked the keeper, with some concern.

"He is dead."

The man looked more relieved than otherwise.

"You don't say so. Well, I dare say it's best for all parties."

"Was he—dangerous?"

"'Omicidal, d'you mean? Oh, no. 'Armless enough. Persecution mania very acute. Full of secret societies from China that had got him shut up. They're all the same."

I shuddered.

"How long had he been shut up?" asked Poirot.

"A matter of two years now."

"I see," said Poirot quietly. "It never occurred to anybody that he might—be sane?"

The keeper permitted himself to laugh.

"If he was sane, what would he be doing in a lunatic asylum? They all *say* they're sane, you know."

Poirot said no more. He took the man in to see the body. The identification came immediately.

"That's him—right enough," said the keeper callously; "funny sort of bloke, ain't he? Well, gentlemen, I had best go off now and make arrangements under the circumstances. We won't trouble you with the corpse much longer. If there's a hinqest, you will have to appear at it, I dare say. Good morning, sir."

With a rather uncouth bow he shambled out of the room.

A few minutes later Japp arrived. The Scotland Yard inspector was jaunty and dapper as usual.

"Here I am Mossior Poirot. What can I do for you? Thought you were off to the coral strands of somewhere or other to-day?"

"My good Japp, I want to know if you have ever seen this man before."

He led Japp into the bedroom. The inspector

stared down at the figure on the bed with a puzzled face.

"Let me see now—he seems sort of familiar—and I pride myself on my memory, too. Why, God bless my soul, it's Mayerling!"

"And who is—or was—Mayerling?"

"Secret Service chap—not one of our people. Went to Russia five years ago. Never heard of again. Always thought the Bolshies had done him in."

"It all fits in," said Poirot, when Japp had taken his leave, "except for the fact that he seems to have died a natural death."

He stood looking down on the motionless figure with a dissatisfied frown. A puff of wind set the window-curtains flying out, and he looked up sharply.

"I suppose you opened the windows when you laid him down on the bed, Hastings?"

"No, I didn't," I replied. "As far as I remember, they were shut."

Poirot lifted his head suddenly.

"Shut—and now they are open. What can that mean?"

"Somebody came in that way," I suggested.

"Possibly," agreed Poirot, but he spoke absently and without conviction. After a minute or two he said.

"That is not exactly the point I had in mind, Hastings. If only one window was open it would not intrigue me so much. It is both windows being open that strikes me as curious."

He hurried into the other room.

"The sitting-room window is open, too. That also we left shut. Ah !"

He bent over the dead man, examining the corners of the mouth minutely. Then he looked up suddenly.

"He has been gagged, Hastings. Gagged and then poisoned."

"Good heavens !" I exclaimed, shocked. "I suppose we shall find out all about it from the post-mortem."

"We shall find out nothing. He was killed by inhaling strong prussic acid. It was jammed right under his nose. Then the murderer went away again, first opening all the windows. Hydrocyanic acid is exceedingly volatile, but it has a pronounced smell of bitter almonds. With no trace of the smell to guide them, and no suspicion of foul play, death would be put down to some natural cause by the doctors. So this man was in the Secret Service, Hastings. And five years ago he disappeared in Russia."

"The last two years he's been in the Asylum," I said. "But what of the three years before that ?"

Poirot shook his head, and then caught my arm.

"The clock, Hastings, look at the clock."

I followed his gaze to the mantelpiece. The clock had stopped at four o'clock.

"*Mon ami*, some one has tampered with it. It had still three days to run. It is an eight-day clock, you comprehend?"

"But what should they want to do that for? Some idea of a false scent by making the crime appear to have taken place at four o'clock?"

"No, no; rearrange your ideas, *mon ami*. Exercise your little gray cells. You are Mayerling. You hear something, perhaps—and you know well enough that your doom is sealed. You have just time to leave a sign. *Four* o'clock, Hastings. Number Four, the *destroyer*. Ah! an idea!"

He rushed into the other room and seized the telephone. He asked for Hanwell.

"You are the Asylum, yes? I understand there has been an escape to-day? What is that you say? A little moment, if you please. Will you repeat that? Ah! *parfaitement*."

He hung up the receiver, and turned to me.

"You heard, Hastings? *There has been no escape*."

"But the man who came—the keeper?" I said.

"I wonder—I very much wonder."

"You mean——?"

"Number Four—the destroyer."

I gazed at Poirot dumbfounded. A minute or two after, on recovering my voice, I said :—

"We shall know him again, anywhere, that's one thing. He was a man of very pronounced personality."

"Was he, *mon ami*? I think not. He was burly and bluff and red-faced, with a thick moustache and a hoarse voice. He will be none of those things by this time, and for the rest, he has nondescript eyes, nondescript ears, and a perfect set of false teeth. Identification is not such an easy matter as you seem to think. Next time——"

"You think there will be a next time?" I interrupted.

Poirot's face grew very grave.

"It is a duel to the death, *mon ami*. You and I on the one side, the Big Four on the other. They have won the first trick; but they have failed in their plan to get me out of the way, and in the future they have to reckon with Hercule Poirot!"

CHAPTER III

WE HEAR MORE ABOUT LI CHANG YEN

FOR a day or two after our visit from the fake Asylum attendant I was in some hopes that he might return, and I refused to leave the flat even for a moment. As far as I could see, he had no reason to suspect that we had penetrated his disguise. He might, I thought, return and try to remove the body, but Poirot scoffed at my reasoning.

"*Mon ami*," he said, "if you wish you may wait in to put salt on the little bird's tail, but for me I do not waste my time so."

"Well then, Poirot," I argued, "why did he run the risk of coming at all. If he intended to return later for the body, I can see some point in his visit. He would at least be removing the evidence against himself; as it is, he does not seem to have gained anything."

Poirot shrugged his most Gallic shrug. "But you do not see with the eyes of Number Four, Hastings," he said. "You talk of evidence, but what evidence have we against him? True, we have a body, but we have no proof even that

the man was murdered—prussic acid, when inhaled, leaves no trace. Again, we can find no one who saw any one enter the flat during our absence, and we have found out nothing about the movements of our late friend, Mayerling. . . .

“No, Hastings, Number Four has left no trace, and he knows it. His visit we may call a reconnaissance. Perhaps he wanted to make quite sure that Mayerling was dead, but more likely, I think, he came to see Hercule Poirot, and to have speech with the adversary whom alone he must fear.”

Poirot’s reasoning appeared to me typically egotistical, but I forbore to argue.

“And what about the inquest?” I asked. “I suppose you will explain things clearly there, and let the police have a full description of Number Four.”

“And to what end? Can we produce anything to impress a coroner’s jury of your solid Britishers? Is our description of Number Four of any value? No; we shall allow them to call it ‘Accidental Death,’ and may be, although I have not much hope, our clever murderer will pat himself on the back that he deceived Hercule Poirot in the first round.”

Poirot was right as usual. We saw no more of the man from the asylum, and the inquest, at

which I gave evidence, but which Poirot did not even attend, aroused no public interest.

As, in view of his intended trip to South America, Poirot had wound up his affairs before my arrival, he had at this time no cases on hand, but although he spent most of his time in the flat I could get little out of him. He remained buried in an arm-chair, and discouraged my attempts at conversation.

And then one morning, about a week after the murder, he asked me if I would care to accompany him on a visit he wished to make. I was pleased, for I felt he was making a mistake in trying to work things out so entirely on his own, and I wished to discuss the case with him. But I found he was not communicative. Even when I asked where we were going, he would not answer.

Poirot loves being mysterious. He will never part with a piece of information until the last possible moment. In this instance, having taken successively a 'bus and two trains, and arrived in the neighbourhood of one of London's most depressing southern suburbs, he consented at last to explain matters.

"We go, Hastings, to see the one man in England who knows most of the underground life of China."

"Indeed ! Who is he ?"

"A man you have never heard of—a Mr. John Ingles. To all intents and purposes, he is a retired Civil Servant of mediocre intellect, with a house full of Chinese curios with which he bores his friends and acquaintances. Nevertheless, I am assured by those who should know that the only man capable of giving me the information I seek is this same John Ingles."

A few moments more saw us ascending the steps of The Laurels, as Mr. Ingles's residence was called. Personally, I did not notice a laurel bush of any kind, so deduced that it had been named according to the usual obscure nomenclature of the suburbs.

We were admitted by an impassive-faced Chinese servant and ushered into the presence of his master. Mr. Ingles was a squarely-built man, somewhat yellow of countenance, with deep-set eyes that were oddly reflective in character. He rose to greet us, setting aside an open letter which he had held in his hand. He referred to it after his greeting.

"Sit down, won't you ? Halsey tells me that you want some information and that I may be useful to you in the matter."

"That is so, monsieur. I ask of you if you have any knowledge of a man named Li Chang Yen ?"

"That's rum—very rum indeed. How did you come to hear about the man?"

"You know him, then?"

"I've met him once. And I know something of him—not quite as much as I should like to. But it surprises me that any one else in England should even have heard of him. He's a great man in his way—mandarin class and all that, you know—but that's not the crux of the matter. There's good reason to suppose that he's the man behind it all."

"Behind what?"

"Everything. The world-wide unrest, the labour troubles that beset every nation, and the revolutions that break out in some. There are people, not scaremongers, who know what they are talking about, and they say that there is a force behind the scenes which aims at nothing less than the disintegration of civilisation. In Russia, you know, there were many signs that Lenin and Trotsky were mere puppets whose every action was dictated by another's brain. I have no definite proof that would count with you, but I am quite convinced that this brain was Li Chang Yen's."

"Oh, come," I protested, "isn't that a bit far-fetched? How would a Chinaman cut any ice in Russia?"

Poirot frowned at me irritably.

"For you, Hastings," he said, "everything is far-fetched that comes not from your own imagination ; for me, I agree with this gentleman. But continue, I pray, monsieur."

"What exactly he hopes to get out of it all I cannot pretend to say for certain," went on Mr. Ingles ; "but I assume his disease is one that has attacked great brains from the time of Akbar and Alexander to Napoleon—a lust for power and personal supremacy. Up to modern times armed force was necessary for conquest, but in this century of unrest a man like Li Chang Yen can use other means. I have evidence that he has unlimited money behind him for bribery and propaganda, and there are signs that he controls some scientific force more powerful than the world has dreamed of."

Poirot was following Mr. Ingles's words with the closest attention.

"And in China ?" he asked. "He moves there too ?"

The other nodded in emphatic assent.

"There," he said, "although I can produce no proof that would count in a court of law, I speak from my own knowledge. I know personally every man who counts for anything in China to-day, and this I can tell you : the men

who loom most largely in the public eye are men of little or no personality. They are marionettes who dance to the wires pulled by a master hand, and that hand is Li Chang Yen's. His is the controlling brain of the East to-day. We don't understand the East—we never shall ; but Li Chang Yen is its moving spirit. Not that he comes out into the limelight—oh, not at all ; he never moves from his palace in Peking. But he pulls strings—that's it, pulls strings—and things happen far away."

"And is there no one to oppose him ?" asked Poirot.

Mr. Ingles leant forward in his chair.

"Four men have tried in the last four years," he said slowly ; "men of character, and honesty, and brain power. Any one of them might in time have interfered with his plans." He paused.

"Well ?" I queried.

"Well, they are dead. One wrote an article, and mentioned Li Chang Yen's name in connection with the riots in Peking, and within two days he was stabbed in the street. His murderer was never caught. The offences of the other two were similar. In a speech or an article, or in conversation, each linked Li Chang Yen's name with rioting or revolution, and within a

week of his indiscretion each was dead. One was poisoned ; one died of cholera, an isolated case—not part of an epidemic ; and one was found dead in his bed. The cause of the last death was never determined, but I was told by a doctor who saw the corpse that it was burnt and shrivelled as though a wave of electrical energy of incredible power had passed through it.”

“ And Li Chang Yen ? ” inquired Poirot. “ Naturally nothing is traced to him, but there are signs, eh ? ”

Mr. Ingles shrugged.

“ Oh, signs—yes, certainly. And once I found a man who would talk, a brilliant young Chinese chemist who was a protégé of Li Chang Yen’s. He came to me one day, this chemist, and I could see that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He hinted to me of experiments on which he’d been engaged in Li Chang Yen’s palace under the mandarin’s direction—experiments on coolies in which the most revolting disregard for human life and suffering had been shown. His nerve had completely broken, and he was in the most pitiable state of terror. I put him to bed in a top room of my own house, intending to question him the next day—and that, of course, was stupid of me.”

“ How did they get him ? ” demanded Poirot.

"That I shall never know. I woke that night to find my house in flames, and was lucky to escape with my life. Investigation showed that a fire of amazing intensity had broken out on the top floor, and the remains of my young chemist friend were charred to a cinder."

I could see from the earnestness with which he had been speaking that Mr. Ingles was a man mounted on his hobby horse, and evidently he, too, realised that he had been carried away, for he laughed apologetically.

"But, of course," he said, "I have no proofs, and you, like the others, will merely tell me that I have a bee in my bonnet."

"On the contrary," said Poirot quietly, "we have every reason to believe your story. We ourselves are more than a little interested in Li Chang Yen."

"Very odd your knowing about him. Didn't fancy a soul in England had ever heard of him. I'd rather like to know how you did come to hear of him—if it's not indiscreet."

"Not in the least, monsieur. A man took refuge in my rooms. He was suffering badly from shock, but he managed to tell us enough to interest us in this Li Chang Yen. He described four people—the Big Four—an organisation hitherto undreamed of. Number One is Li

Chang Yen, Number Two is an unknown American, Number Three an equally unknown Frenchwoman, Number Four may be called the executive of the organisation—the *destroyer*. My informant died. Tell me, monsieur, is that phrase known to you at all? 'The Big Four.'

"Not in connection with Li Chang Yen. No, I can't say it is. But I've heard it, or read it, just lately—and in some unusual connection too. Ah, I've got it."

He rose and went across to an inlaid lacquer cabinet—an exquisite thing, as even I could see. He returned with a letter in his hand.

"Here you are. Note from an old sea-faring man I ran against once in Shanghai. Hoary old reprobate—maudlin with drink by now, I should say. I took this to be the ravings of alcoholism."

He read it aloud :—

"DEAR SIR,—You may not remember me, but you did me a good turn once in Shanghai. Do me another now. I must have money to get out of the country. I'm well hid here, I hope, but any day they may get me. The Big Four, I mean. It's life or death. I've plenty of money, but I daren't get at it, for fear of putting them wise. Send me a couple of hundred in notes.

I'll repay it faithful—I swear to that.—Your servant, sir,

“JONATHAN WHALLEY.”

“Dated from Granite Bungalow, Hoppaton, Dartmoor. I'm afraid I regarded it as rather a crude method of relieving me of a couple of hundred which I can ill spare. If it's any use to you——” He held it out.

“*Je vous remercie, monsieur. I start for Hoppaton à l'heure même.*”

“Dear me, this is very interesting. Supposing I came along too? Any objection?”

“I should be charmed to have your company, but we must start at once. We shall not reach Dartmoor until close on nightfall, as it is.”

John Ingles did not delay us more than a couple of minutes, and soon we were in the train moving out of Paddington bound for the West Country. Hoppaton was a small village clustering in a hollow right on the fringe of the moorland. It was reached by a nine-mile drive from Moretonhamstead. It was about eight o'clock when we arrived; but as the month was July, the daylight was still abundant.

We drove into the narrow street of the village and then stopped to ask our way of an old rustic.

“Granite Bungalow,” said the old man

reflectively, "it be Granite Bungalow you do want? Eh?"

We assured him that this was what we did want.

The old man pointed to a small gray cottage at the end of the street.

"There be t'Bungalow. Do yee want to see t'Inspector?"

"What Inspector?" asked Poirot sharply; "what do you mean?"

"Haven't yee heard about t'murder, then? A shocking business t'was seemingly. Pools of blood, they do say."

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured Poirot. "This Inspector of yours, I must see him at once."

Five minutes later we were closeted with Inspector Meadows. The Inspector was inclined to be stiff at first, but at the magic name of Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard, he unbent.

"Yes, sir; murdered this morning. A shocking business. They 'phoned to Moreton, and I came out at once. Looked a mysterious thing to begin with. The old man—he was about seventy, you know, and fond of his glass, from all I hear—was lying on the floor of the living-room. There was a bruise on his head and his throat was cut from ear to ear. Blood all over the place, as you can understand. The

woman who cooks for him, Betsy Andrews, she told us that her master had several little Chinese jade figures, that he'd told her were very valuable, and these had disappeared. That, of course, looked like assault and robbery ; but there were all sorts of difficulties in the way of that solution. The old fellow had two people in the house ; Betsy Andrews, who is a Hoppaton woman, and a rough kind of man-servant, Robert Grant. Grant had gone to the farm to fetch the milk, which he does every day, and Betsy had stepped out to have a chat with a neighbour. She was only away twenty minutes—between ten and half-past—and the crime must have been done then. Grant returned to the house first. He went in by the back door, which was open—no one locks up doors round here—not in broad daylight, at all events—put the milk in the larder, and went into his own room to read the paper and have a smoke. Had no idea anything unusual had occurred—at least, that's what he says. Then Betsy comes in, goes into the living-room, sees what's happened, and lets out a screech to wake the dead. That's all fair and square. Some one got in whilst those two were out, and did the poor old man in. But it struck me at once that he must be a pretty cool customer. He'd have to come right up the village street, or

creep through some one's back yard. Granite Bungalow has got houses all round it, as you can see. How was it that no one had seen him?"

The Inspector paused with a flourish.

"Aha, I perceive your point," said Poirot. "To continue?"

"Well, sir, fishy, I said to myself—fishy. And I began to look about me. Those jade figures, now. Would a common tramp ever suspect that they were valuable? Anyway, it was madness to try such a thing in broad daylight. Suppose the old man had yelled for help?"

"I suppose, Inspector," said Mr. Ingles, "that the bruise on the head was inflicted before death?"

"Quite right, sir. First knocked him silly, the murderer did, and then cut his throat. That's clear enough. But how the dickens did he come or go? They notice strangers quick enough in a little place like this. It came to me all at once—nobody did come. I took a good look round. It had rained the night before, and there were footprints clear enough going in and out of the kitchen. In the living-room there were two sets of footprints only (Betsy Andrews' stopped at the door)—Mr. Whalley's (he was wearing carpet slippers) and another man's. The other man had stepped in the blood-stains, and I traced his bloody footprints—I beg your pardon, sir."

"Not at all," said Mr. Ingles, with a faint smile ; " the adjective is perfectly understood."

"I traced them to the kitchen—but not beyond. Point Number One. On the lintel of Robert Grant's door was a faint smear—a smear of blood. That's point Number Two. Point Number Three was when I got hold of Grant's boots—which he had taken off—and fitted them to the marks. That settled it. It was an inside job. I warned Grant and took him into custody ; and what do you think I found packed away in his portmanteau ? The little jade figures and a ticket-of-leave. Robert Grant was also Abraham Biggs, convicted for felony and housebreaking five years ago."

The Inspector paused triumphantly.

"What do you think of that, gentlemen ?"

"I think," said Poirot, "that it appears a very clear case—of a surprising clearness, in fact. This Biggs, or Grant, he must be a man very foolish and uneducated, eh ?"

"Oh, he is that—a rough, common sort of fellow. No idea of what a footprint may mean."

"Clearly he reads not the detective fiction ! Well, Inspector, I congratulate you. We may look at the scene of the crime. Yes ?"

"I'll take you there myself this minute. I'd like you to see those footprints."

"I, too, should like to see them. Yes, yes, very interesting, very ingenious."

We set out forthwith. Mr. Ingles and the Inspector forged ahead. I drew Poirot back a little so as to be able to speak to him out of the Inspector's hearing.

"What do you really think, Poirot. Is there more in this than meets the eye?"

"That is just the question, *mon ami*. Whalley says plainly enough in his letter that the Big Four are on his track, and we know, you and I, that the Big Four is no bogey for the children. Yet everything seems to say that this man Grant committed the crime. Why did he do so? For the sake of the little jade figurcs? Or is he an agent of the Big Four? I confess that this last seems more likely. However valuable the jade, a man of that class was not likely to realise the fact—at any rate, not to the point of committing murder for them. (That, *par exemple*, ought to have struck the Inspector.) He could have stolen the jade and made off with it instead of committing a brutal and quite purposeless murder. Ah, yes; I fear our Devonshire friend has not used his little gray cells. He has measured footprints, and has omitted to reflect and arrange his ideas with the necessary order and method."

CHAPTER IV

THE IMPORTANCE OF A LEG OF MUTTON

THE Inspector drew a key from his pocket and unlocked the door of Granite Bungalow. The day had been fine and dry, so our feet were not likely to leave any prints ; nevertheless, we wiped them carefully on the mat before entering.

A woman came up out of the gloom and spoke to the Inspector, and he turned aside. Then he spoke over his shoulder.

“Have a good look round, Mr. Poirot, and see all there is to be seen. I’ll be back in about ten minutes. By the way, here’s Grant’s boot. I brought it along with me for you to compare the impressions.”

We went into the living-room, and the sound of the Inspector’s footsteps died away outside. Ingles was attracted immediately by some Chinese curios on a table in the corner, and went over to examine them. He seemed to take no interest in Poirot’s doings. I, on the other hand, watched him with breathless interest. The floor was covered with a dark-green linoleum which was

ideal for showing up footprints. A door at the farther end led into the small kitchen. From there another door led into the scullery (where the back door was situated), and another into the bedroom which had been occupied by Robert Grant. Having explored the ground, Poirot commented upon it in a low running monologue.

"Here is where the body lay ; that big dark stain and the splashes all around mark the spot. Traces of carpet slippers and 'number nine' boots, you observe, but all very confused. Then two sets of tracks leading to and from the kitchen ; whoever the murderer was, he came in that way. You have the boot, Hastings ? Give it to me." He compared it carefully with the prints. "Yes, both made by the same man, Robert Grant. He came in that way, killed the old man, and went back to the kitchen. He had stepped in the blood ; see the stains he left as he went out ? Nothing to be seen in the kitchen—all the village has been walking about in it. He went into his own room—no, first he went back again to the scene of the crime—was that to get the little jade figures ? Or had he forgotten something that might incriminate him ?"

"Perhaps he killed the old man the second time he went in ?" I suggested.

"*Mais non*, you do not observe. On one of

the outgoing footmarks stained with blood there is superimposed an ingoing one. I wonder what he went back for—the little jade figures as an afterthought? It is all ridiculous—stupid.”

“Well, he’s given himself away pretty hopelessly.”

“*N’est-ce pas ?* I tell you, Hastings, it goes against reason. It offends my little gray cells. Let us go into his bedroom—ah, yes ; there is the smear of blood on the lintel and just a trace of footmarks—blood-stained. Robert Grant’s footmarks, and his only, near the body—Robert Grant the only man who went near the house. Yes, it must be so.”

“What about the old woman?” I said suddenly. “She was in the house alone after Grant had gone for the milk. She might have killed him and then gone out. Her feet would leave no prints if she hadn’t been outside.”

“Very good, Hastings. I wondered whether that hypothesis would occur to you. I had already thought of it and rejected it. Betsy Andrews is a local woman, well known hereabouts. She can have no connection with the Big Four ; and, besides, old Whalley was a powerful fellow, by all accounts. This is a man’s work—not a woman’s.”

“I suppose the Big Four couldn’t have had

some diabolical contrivance concealed in the ceiling—something which descended automatically and cut the old man's throat and was afterwards drawn up again?"

"Like Jacob's ladder? I know, Hastings, that you have an imagination of the most fertile—but I implore of you to keep it within bounds."

I subsided, abashed. Poirot continued to wander about, poking into rooms and cupboards with a profoundly dissatisfied expression on his face. Suddenly he uttered an excited yelp, reminiscent of a Pomeranian dog. I rushed to join him. He was standing in the larder in a dramatic attitude. In his hand he was brandishing a leg of mutton!

"My dear Poirot!" I cried. "What is the matter? Have you suddenly gone mad?"

"Regard, I pray you, this mutton. But regard it closely!"

I regarded it as closely as I could, but could see nothing unusual about it. It seemed to me a very ordinary leg of mutton. I said as much. Poirot threw me a withering glance.

"But do you not see this—and this—and this——"

He illustrated each "this" with a jab at the unoffending joint, dislodging small icicles as he did so.

Poirot had just accused me of being imaginative, but I now felt that he was far more wildly so than I had ever been. Did he seriously think these slivers of ice were crystals of a deadly poison? That was the only construction I could put upon his extraordinary agitation.

"It's frozen meat," I explained gently. "Imported, you know. New Zealand."

He stared at me for a moment or two and then broke into a strange laugh.

"How marvellous is my friend Hastings! He knows everything—but everything! How do they say—Inquire Within Upon Everything. That is my friend Hastings."

He flung down the leg of mutton on to its dish again and left the larder. Then he looked through the window.

"Here comes our friend the Inspector. It is well. I have seen all I want to see here." He drummed on the table absent-mindedly, as though absorbed in calculation, and then asked suddenly, "What is the day of the week, *mon ami*?"

"Monday," I said, rather astonished. "What——?"

"Ah! Monday, is it? A bad day of the week. To commit a murder on a Monday is a mistake."

Passing back to the living-room, he tapped

the glass on the wall and glanced at the thermometer.

"Set fair, and seventy degrees Fahrenheit. An orthodox English summer's day."

Ingles was still examining various pieces of Chinese pottery.

"You do not take much interest in this inquiry, monsieur?" said Poirot.

The other gave a slow smile.

"It's not my job, you see. I'm a connoisseur of some things, but not of this. So I just stand back and keep out of the way. I've learnt patience in the East."

The Inspector came bustling in, apologising for having been so long away. He insisted on taking us over most of the ground again, but finally we got away.

"I must appreciate your thousand politenesses, Inspector," said Poirot, as we were walking down the village street again. "There is just one more request I should like to put to you."

"You want to see the body, perhaps, sir?"

"Oh, dear me, no! I have not the least interest in the body. I want to see Robert Grant."

"You'll have to drive back with me to Moreton to see him, sir."

"Very well, I will do so. But I must see him and be able to speak to him alone."

The Inspector caressed his upper lip.

"Well, I don't know about that, sir."

"I assure you that if you can get through to Scotland Yard you will receive full authority."

"I've heard of you, of course, sir, and I know you've done us a good turn now and again. But it's very irregular."

"Nevertheless, it is necessary," said Poirot calmly. "It is necessary for this reason—Grant is not the murderer."

"What? Who is, then?"

"The murderer was, I should fancy, a youngish man. He drove up to Granite Bungalow in a trap, which he left outside. He went in, committed the murder, came out, and drove away again. He was bare-headed, and his clothing was slightly blood-stained."

"But—but the whole village would have seen him!"

"Not under certain circumstances."

"Not if it was dark, perhaps; but the crime was committed in broad daylight."

Poirot merely smiled.

"And the horse and trap, sir—how could you tell that? Any amount of wheeled vehicles

have passed along outside. There's no mark of one in particular to be seen."

"Not with the eyes of the body, perhaps ; but with the eyes of the mind, yes."

The Inspector touched his forehead significantly with a grin at me. I was utterly bewildered, but I had faith in Poirot. Further discussion ended in our all driving back to Moreton with the Inspector. Poirot and I were taken to Grant, but a constable was to be present during the interview. Poirot went straight to the point.

"Grant, I know you to be innocent of this crime. Relate to me in your own words exactly what happened."

The prisoner was a man of medium height, with a somewhat unpleasing cast of features. He looked a jail-bird if ever a man did.

"Honest to God, I never did it," he whined. "Some one put those little glass figures amongst my traps. It was a frame-up, that's what it was. I went straight to my rooms when I came in, like I said. I never knew a thing till Betsy screeched out. S'welp me, God, I didn't."

Poirot rose.

"If you can't tell me the truth, that is the end of it."

"But, guv'nor——"

"You *did* go into the room—you *did* know

your master was dead ; and you were just preparing to make a bolt of it when the good Betsy made her terrible discovery."

The man stared at Poirot with a dropped jaw.

"Come now, is it not so ? I tell you solemnly—on my word of honour—that to be frank now is your only chance."

"I'll risk it," said the man suddenly. "It was just as you say. I came in, and went straight to the master—and there he was, dead on the floor and blood all round. Then I got the wind up proper. They'd ferret out my record, and for a certainty they'd say it was me as had done him in. My only thought was to get away—at once—before he was found——"

"And the jade figures ?"

The man hesitated.

"You see——"

"You took them by a kind of reversion to instinct, as it were ? You had heard your master say that they were valuable, and you felt you might as well go the whole hog. That, I understand. Now, answer me this. Was it the second time that you went into the room that you took the figures ?"

"I didn't go in a second time. Once was enough for me."

"You are sure of that ?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Good. Now, when did you come out of prison?"

"Two months ago."

"How did you obtain this job?"

"Through one of them Prisoners' Help Societies. Bloke met me when I came out."

"What was he like?"

"Not exactly a parson, but looked like one. Soft black hat and mincing way of talking. Got a broken front tooth. Spectacled chap. Saunders his name was. Said he hoped I was repentant, and that he'd find me a good post. I went to old Whalley on his recommendation."

Poirot rose once more.

"I thank you. I know all now. Have patience." He paused in the doorway and added: "Saunders gave you a pair of boots, didn't he?"

Grant looked very astonished.

"Why, yes, he did. But how did you know?"

"It is my business to know things," said Poirot gravely.

After a word or two to the Inspector, the three of us went to the White Hart and discussed eggs and bacon and Devonshire cider.

"Any elucidations yet?" asked Ingles, with a smile.

THE BIG FOUR

“Yes, the case is clear enough now ; but, see you, I shall have a good deal of difficulty in proving it. Whalley was killed by order of the Big Four—but not by Grant. A very clever man got Grant the post and deliberately planned to make him the scapegoat—an easy matter with Grant’s prison record. He gave him a pair of boots, one of two duplicate pairs. The other he kept himself. It was all so simple. When Grant is out of the house, and Betsy is chatting in the village (which she probably did every day of her life), he drives up wearing the duplicate boots, enters the kitchen, goes through into the living-room, fells the old man with a blow, and then cuts his throat. Then he returns to the kitchen, removes the boots, puts on another pair, and, carrying the first pair, goes out to his trap and drives off again.”

Ingles looked steadily at Poirot.

“There’s a catch in it still. Why did nobody see him ? ”

“Ah ! That is where the cleverness of Number Four, I am convinced, comes in. Everybody saw him—and yet nobody saw him. You see, he drove up in a butcher’s cart ! ”

I uttered an exclamation.

“The leg of mutton ? ”

“Exactly, Hastings, the leg of mutton.

Everybody swore that no one had been to Granite Bungalow that morning, but, nevertheless, I found in the larder a leg of mutton, still frozen. It was Monday, so the meat must have been delivered that morning; for if on Saturday, in this hot weather, it would not have remained frozen over Sunday. So some one *had* been to the Bungalow, and a man on whom a trace of blood here and there would attract no attention."

"Damned ingenious!" cried Ingles approvingly.

"Yes, he is clever, Number Four."

"As clever as Hercule Poirot?" I murmured.

My friend threw me a glance of dignified reproach.

"There are some jests that you should not permit yourself, Hastings," he said sententiously.

"Have I not saved an innocent man from being sent to the gallows? That is enough for one day."

CHAPTER V

DISAPPEARANCE OF A SCIENTIST

PERSONALLY, I don't think that, even when a jury had acquitted Robert Grant, alias Biggs, of the murder of Jonathan Whalley, Inspector Meadows was entirely convinced of his innocence. The case which he had built up against Grant—the man's record, the jade which he had stolen, the boots which fitted the footprints so exactly—was to his matter-of-fact mind too complete to be easily upset; but Poirot, compelled much against his inclination to give evidence, convinced the jury. Two witnesses were produced who had seen a butcher's cart drive up to the bungalow on that Monday morning, and the local butcher testified that his cart only called there on Wednesdays and Fridays.

A woman was actually found who, when questioned, remembered seeing the butcher's man leaving the bungalow, but she could furnish no useful description of him. The only impression he seemed to have left on her mind was

that he was clean-shaven, of medium height, and looked exactly like a butcher's man. At this description Poirot shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

"It is as I tell you, Hastings," he said to me, after the trial. "He is an artist, this one. He disguises himself not with the false beard and the blue spectacles. He alters his features, yes ; but that is the least part. For the time being he *is* the man he would be. He lives in his part."

Certainly I was compelled to admit that the man who had visited us from Hanwell had fitted in exactly with my idea of what an Asylum attendant should look like. I should never for a moment have dreamt of doubting that he was genuine.

It was all a little discouraging, and our experience on Dartmoor did not seem to have helped us at all. I said as much to Poirot, but he would not admit that we had gained nothing.

"We progress," he said ; "we progress. At every contact with this man we learn a little of his mind and his methods. Of us and our plans he knows nothing."

"And there, Poirot," I protested, "he and I seem to be in the same boat. You don't seem to me to have any plans, you seem to sit and wait for him to do something."

Poirot smiled.

"*Mon ami*, you do not change. Always the same Hastings, who would be up and at their throats. Perhaps," he added, as a knock sounded on the door, "you have here your chance ; it may be our friend who enters." And he laughed at my disappointment when Inspector Japp and another man entered the room.

"Good evening, moosior," said the Inspector. "Allow me to introduce Captain Kent of the United States Secret Service."

Captain Kent was a tall, lean American, with a singularly impassive face which looked as though it had been carved out of wood.

"Pleased to meet you, gentlemen," he murmured, as he shook hands jerkily.

Poirot threw an extra log on the fire, and brought forward more easy-chairs. I brought out glasses and the whisky and soda. The captain took a deep draught, and expressed appreciation.

"Legislation in your country is still sound," he observed.

"And now to business," said Japp. "Moosior Poirot here made a certain request to me. He was interested in some concern that went by the name of the Big Four, and he asked me to let him know at any time if I came across a mention of it in my official line of business. I

didn't take much stock in the matter, but I remembered what he said, and when the captain here came over with rather a curious story, I said at once, "We'll go round to Moosior Poirot's."

Poirot looked across at Captain Kent, and the American took up the tale.

"You may remember reading, M. Poirot, that a number of torpedo boats and destroyers were sunk by being dashed upon the rocks off the American coast. It was just after the Japanese earthquake, and the explanation given was that the disaster was the result of a tidal wave. Now, a short time ago, a round-up was made of certain crooks and gunmen, and with them were captured some papers which put an entirely new face upon the matter. They appeared to refer to some organisation called the 'Big Four,' and gave an incomplete description of some powerful wireless installation—a concentration of wireless energy far beyond anything so far attempted, and capable of focusing a beam of great intensity upon some given spot. The claims made for this invention seemed manifestly absurd, but I turned them in to headquarters for what they were worth, and one of our high-brow professors got busy on them. Now it appears that one of your British scientists read

a paper upon the subject before the British Association. His colleagues didn't think great shakes of it, by all accounts, thought it far-fetched and fanciful, but your scientist stuck to his guns, and declared that he himself was on the eve of success in his experiments."

"*Eh, bien?*" demanded Poirot, with interest.

"It was suggested that I should come over here and get an interview with this gentleman. Quite a young fellow, he is, Halliday by name. He is the leading authority on the subject, and I was to get from him whether the thing suggested was anyway possible."

"And was it?" I asked eagerly.

"That's just what I don't know. I haven't seen Mr. Halliday—and I'm not likely to, by all accounts."

"The truth of the matter is," said Japp, shortly, "Halliday's disappeared."

"When?"

"Two months ago."

"Was his disappearance reported?"

"Of course it was. His wife came to us in a great state. We did what we could, but I knew all along it would be no good."

"Why not?"

"Never is—when a man disappears that way." Japp winked.

"What way?"

"Paris."

"So Halliday disappeared in Paris?"

"Yes. Went over there on scientific work—so he said. Of course, he'd have to say something like that. But you know what it means when a man disappears over there. Either it's Apache work, and that's the end of it—or else its voluntary disappearance—and that's a great deal the commoner of the two, I can tell you. Gay Paree and all that, you know. Sick of home life. Halliday and his wife had had a tiff before he started, which all helps to make it a pretty clear case."

"I wonder," said Poirot thoughtfully.

The American was looking at him curiously.

"Say, mister," he drawled, "what's this Big Four idea?"

"The Big Four," said Poirot, "is an international organisation which has at its head a Chinaman. He is known as Number One. Number Two is an American. Number Three is a Frenchwoman. Number Four, the 'Destroyer,' is an Englishman."

"A Frenchwoman, eh?" The American whistled. "And Halliday disappeared in France. Maybe there's something in this. What's her name?"

"I don't know. I know nothing about her."

"But it's a mighty big proposition, eh?" suggested the other.

Poirot nodded, as he arranged the glasses in a neat row on the tray. His love of order was as great as ever.

"What was the idea in sinking those boats? Are the Big Four a German stunt?"

"The Big Four are for themselves—and for themselves only, M. le Capitaine. Their aim is world domination."

The American burst out laughing, but broke off at the sight of Poirot's serious face.

"You laugh, monsieur," said Poirot, shaking a finger at him. "You reflect not—you use not the little gray cells of the brain. Who are these men who send a portion of your navy to destruction simply as a trial of their power? For that was all it was, Monsieur, a test of this new force of magnetical attraction which they hold."

"Go on with you, moosior," said Japp good-humouredly. "I've read of super criminals many a time, but I've never come across them. Well, you've heard Captain Kent's story. Anything further I can do for you?"

"Yes, my good friend. You can give me the address of Mrs. Halliday—and also a few words of introduction to her if you will be so kind."

Thus it was that the following day saw us bound for Chetwynd Lodge, near the village of Chobham in Surrey.

Mrs. Halliday received us at once, a tall, fair woman, nervous and eager in manner. With her was her little girl, a beautiful child of five.

Poirot explained the purpose of our visit.

"Oh! Monsieur Poirot, I am so glad, so thankful. I have heard of you, of course. You will not be like these Scotland Yard people, who will not listen or try to understand. And the French Police are just as bad—worse, I think. They are all convinced that my husband has gone off with some other woman. But he wasn't like that! All he thought of in life was his work. Half our quarrels came from that. He cared for it more than he did for me."

"Englishmen, they are like that," said Poirot soothingly. "And if it is not work, it is the games, the sport. All those things they take *au grand sérieux*. Now, madame, recount to me exactly, in detail, and as methodically as you can, the exact circumstances of your husband's disappearance."

"My husband went to Paris on Thursday, the 20th of July. He was to meet and visit various people there connected with his work, amongst them Madame Olivier."

Poirot nodded at the mention of the famous French woman chemist, who had eclipsed even Madame Curie in the brilliance of her achievements. She had been decorated by the French Government, and was one of the most prominent personalities of the day.

"He arrived there in the evening and went at once to the Hotel Castiglione in the Rue de Castiglione. On the following morning, he had an appointment with Professor Bourgoneau, which he kept. His manner was normal and pleasant. The two men had a most interesting conversation, and it was arranged that he should witness some experiments in the professor's laboratory on the following day. He lunched alone at the Café Royal, went for a walk in the Bois, and then visited Madame Olivier at her house at Passy. There, also, his manner was perfectly normal. He left about six. Where he dined is not known, probably alone at some restaurant. He returned to the hotel about eleven o'clock and went straight up to his room, after inquiring if any letters had come for him. On the following morning, he walked out of the hotel, and has not been seen again."

"At what time did he leave the hotel? At the hour when he would normally leave it to

keep his appointment at Professor Bourgoneau's laboratory ? ”

“ We do not know. He was not remarked leaving the hotel. But no *petit déjeuner* was served to him, which seems to indicate that he went out early.”

“ Or he might, in fact, have gone out again after he came in the night before ? ”

“ I do not think so. His bed had been slept in, and the night porter would have remembered any one going out at that hour.”

“ A very just observation, madame. We may take it, then, that he left early on the following morning—and that is reassuring from one point of view. He is not likely to have fallen a victim to any Apache assault at that hour. His baggage, now, was it all left behind ? ”

Mrs. Halliday seemed rather reluctant to answer, but at last she said :—

“ No—he must have taken one small suit-case with him.”

“ H'm,” said Poirot thoughtfully, “ I wonder where he was that evening. If we knew that, we should know a great deal. Whom did he meet ?—there lies the mystery. Madame, myself I do not of necessity accept the view of the police ; with them is it always ‘ *Cherchez la femme.* ’ Yet it is clear that something occurred that night to

alter your husband's plans. You say he asked for letters on returning to the hotel. Did he receive any?"

"One only, and that must have been the one I wrote him on the day he left England."

Poirot remained sunk in thought for a full minute, then he rose briskly to his feet.

"Well, madame, the solution of the mystery lies in Paris, and to find it I myself journey to Paris on the instant."

"It is all a long time ago, monsieur."

"Yes, yes. Nevertheless, it is there that we must seek."

He turned to leave the room, but paused with his hand on the door.

"Tell me, madame, do you ever remember your husband mentioning the phrase, 'The Big Four'?"

"The Big Four," she repeated thoughtfully.
"No, I can't say I do."

CHAPTER VI

THE WOMAN ON THE STAIRS

THAT was all that could be elicited from Mrs. Halliday. We hurried back to London, and the following day saw us *en route* for the Continent. With rather a rueful smile, Poirot observed :—

“ This Big Four, they make me to bestir myself, *mon ami*. I run up and down, all over the ground, like our old friend ‘ the human foxhound. ’ ”

“ Perhaps you’ll meet him in Paris,” I said, knowing that he referred to a certain Giraud, one of the most trusted detectives of the Sureté, whom he had met on a previous occasion.

Poirot made a grimace. “ I devoutly hope not. He loved me not, that one.”

“ Won’t it be a very difficult task ? ” I asked. “ To find out what an unknown Englishman did on an evening two months ago ? ”

“ Very difficult, *mon ami*. But, as you know well, difficulties rejoice the heart of Hercule Poirot.”

“ You think the Big Four kidnapped him ? ”

Poirot nodded.

Our inquiries necessarily went over old ground, and we learnt little to add to what Mrs. Halliday had already told us. Poirot had a lengthy interview with Professor Bourgoneau, during which he sought to elicit whether Halliday had mentioned any plan of his own for the evening, but we drew a complete blank.

Our next source of information was the famous Madame Olivier. I was quite excited as we mounted the steps of her villa at Passy. It has always seemed to me extraordinary that a woman should go so far in the scientific world. I should have thought a purely masculine brain was needed for such work.

The door was opened by a young lad of seventeen or thereabouts, who reminded me vaguely of an acolyte, so ritualistic was his manner. Poirot had taken the trouble to arrange our interview beforehand, as he knew Madame Olivier never received any one without an appointment, being immersed in research work most of the day.

We were shown into a small *salon*, and presently the mistress of the house came to us there. Madame Olivier was a very tall woman, her tallness accentuated by the long white overall she wore, and a coif like a nun's that shrouded

her head. She had a long pale face, and wonderful dark eyes that burnt with a light almost fanatical. She looked more like a priestess of old than a modern Frenchwoman. One cheek was disfigured by a scar, and I remembered that her husband and co-worker had been killed in an explosion in the laboratory three years before, and that she herself had been terribly burned. Ever since then she had shut herself away from the world, and plunged with fiery energy into the work of scientific research. She received us with cold politeness.

"I have been interviewed by the police many times, messieurs. I think it hardly likely that I can help you, since I have not been able to help them."

"Madame, it is possible that I shall not ask you quite the same questions. To begin with, of what did you talk together, you and M. Halliday?"

She looked a trifle surprised.

"But of his work! His work—and also mine."

"Did he mention to you the theories he had embodied recently in his paper read before the British Association?"

"Certainly he did. It was chiefly of those we spoke."

"His ideas were somewhat fantastic, were they not?" asked Poirot carelessly.

"Some people have thought so. I do not agree."

"You considered them practicable?"

"Perfectly practicable. My own line of research has been somewhat similar, though not undertaken with the same end in view. I have been investigating the *gamma* rays emitted by the substance usually known as Radium C., a product of Radium emanation, and in doing so I have come across some very interesting magnetical phenomena. Indeed, I have a theory as to the actual nature of the force we call magnetism, but it is not yet time for my discoveries to be given to the world. Mr. Halliday's experiments and views were exceedingly interesting to me."

Poirot nodded. Then he asked a question which surprised me.

"Madame, where did you converse on these topics. In here?"

"No, monsieur. In the laboratory."

"May I see it?"

"Certainly."

She led the way to the door from which she had entered. It opened on a small passage. We passed through two doors and found ourselves in the big laboratory, with its array of beakers

and crucibles and a hundred appliances of which I did not even know the names. There were two occupants, both busy with some experiment. Madame Olivier introduced them.

"Mademoiselle Claude, one of my assistants." A tall, serious-faced young girl bowed to us. "Monsieur Henri, an old and trusted friend."

The young man, short and dark, bowed jerkily.

Poirot looked round him. There were two other doors besides the one by which we had entered. One, madame explained, led into the garden, the other into a smaller chamber also devoted to research. Poirot took all this in, then declared himself ready to return to the salon.

"Madame, were you alone with M. Halliday during your interview?"

"Yes, monsieur. My two assistants were in the smaller room next door."

"Could your conversation be overheard—by them or any one else?"

Madame reflected, then shook her head.

"I do not think so. I am almost sure it could not. The doors were all shut."

"Could any one have been concealed in the room?"

"There is the big cupboard in the corner—but the idea is absurd."

“ *Pas tout a fait*, madame. One thing more : did M. Halliday make any mention of his plans for the evening ? ”

“ He said nothing whatever, monsieur.”

“ I thank you, madame, and I apologise for disturbing you. Pray do not trouble—we can find our way out.”

We stepped out into the hall. A lady was just entering the front door as we did so. She ran quickly up the stairs, and I was left with an impression of the heavy mourning that denotes a French widow.

“ A most unusual type of woman, that,” remarked Poirot, as we walked away.

“ Madame Olivier ? Yes, she——”

“ *Mais non*, not Madame Olivier. *Cela va sans dire !* There are not many geniuses of her stamp in the world. No, I referred to the other lady—the lady on the stairs.”

“ I didn’t see her face,” I said, staring. “ And I hardly see how you could have done. She never looked at us.”

“ That is why I said she was an unusual type,” said Poirot placidly. “ A woman who enters her home—for I presume that it is her home since she enters with a key—and runs straight upstairs without even looking at two strange visitors in the hall to see who they are, is a *very*

unusual type of woman—quite unnatural, in fact. *Mille tonnerres !* what is that ? ”

He dragged me back—just in time. A tree had crashed down on to the side walk, just missing us. Poirot stared at it, pale and upset.

“ It was a near thing that ! But clumsy, all the same—for I had no suspicion—at least hardly any suspicion. Yes, but for my quick eyes, the eyes of a cat, Hercule Poirot might now be crushed out of existence—a terrible calamity for the world. And you, too, *mon ami*—though that would not be such a national catastrophe.”

“ Thank you,” I said coldly. “ And what are we going to do now ? ”

“ Do ? ” cried Poirot. “ We are going to think. Yes, here and now, we are going to exercise our little gray cells. This M. Halliday now, was he really in Paris ? Yes, for Professor Bourgoneau, who knows him, saw and spoke to him.”

“ What on earth are you driving at ? ” I cried.

“ That was Friday morning. He was last seen at eleven Friday night—but *was* he seen then ? ”

“ The porter——”

“ A night porter—who had not previously seen Halliday. A man comes in, sufficiently like Halliday—we may trust Number Four for that—asks for letters, goes upstairs, packs a

small suit-case, and slips out the next morning. Nobody saw Halliday all that evening—no, because he was already in the hands of his enemies. Was it Halliday whom Madame Olivier received? Yes, for though she did not know him by sight, an impostor could hardly deceive her on her own special subject. He came here, he had his interview, he left. What happened next?"

Seizing me by the arm, Poirot was fairly dragging me back to the villa.

"Now, *mon ami*, imagine that it is the day after the disappearance, and that we are tracking footprints. You love footprints, do you not? See—here they go, a man's, Mr. Halliday's. . . . He turns to the right as we did, he walks briskly—ah! other footsteps following behind—very quickly—small footsteps, a woman's. See, she catches him up—a slim young woman, in a widow's veil. 'Pardon, monsieur, Madame Olivier desires that I recall you.' He stops, he turns. Now where would the young woman take him? She does not wish to be seen walking with him. Is it coincidence that she catches up with him just where a narrow alleyway opens, dividing two gardens. She leads him down it. 'It is shorter this way, monsieur.' On the right is the garden of Madame Olivier's villa, on the

left the garden of another villa—and from that garden, mark you, the tree fell—so nearly on us. Garden doors from both open on the alley. The ambush is there. Men pour out, overpower him, and carry him into the strange villa.”

“ Good gracious, Poirot,” I cried, “ are you pretending to see all this ? ”

“ I see it with the eyes of the mind, *mon ami*. So, and only so, could it have happened. Come, let us go back to the house.”

“ You want to see Madame Olivier again ? ”

Poirot gave a curious smile.

“ No, Hastings, I want to see the face of the lady on the stairs.”

“ Who do you think she is, a relation of Madame Olivier’s ? ”

“ More probably a secretary—and a secretary engaged not very long ago.”

The same gentle acolyte opened the door to us.

“ Can you tell me,” said Poirot, “ the name of the lady, the widow lady, who came in just now ? ”

“ Madame Veroneau ? Madame’s secretary ? ”

“ That is the lady. Would you be so kind as to ask her to speak to us for a moment.”

The youth disappeared. He soon reappeared.

"I am sorry. Madame Veroneau must have gone out again."

"I think not," said Poirot quietly. "Will you give her my name, M. Hercule Poirot, and say that it is important I should see her at once, as I am just going to the Prefecture."

Again our messenger departed. This time the lady descended. She walked into the salon. We followed her. She turned and raised her veil. To my astonishment I recognised our old antagonist, the Countess Rossakoff, a Russian countess, who had engineered a particularly smart jewel robbery in London.

"As soon as I caught sight of you in the hall, I feared the worst," she observed plaintively.

"My dear Countess Rossakoff——"

She shook her head.

"Inez Veroneau now," she murmured. "A Spaniard, married to a Frenchman. What do you want of me, M. Poirot? You are a terrible man. You hunted me from London. Now, I suppose, you will tell our wonderful Madame Olivier about me, and hunt me from Paris? We poor Russians, we must live, you know."

"It is more serious than that, madame," said Poirot, watching her. "I propose to enter the villa next door, and release M. Halliday, if he is still alive. I know everything, you see."

I saw her sudden pallor. She bit her lip. Then she spoke with her usual decision.

"He is still alive—but he is not at the villa. Come, monsieur, I will make a bargain with you. Freedom for me—and M. Halliday, alive and well, for you."

"I accept," said Poirot. "I was about to propose the same bargain myself. By the way, are the Big Four your employers, madame?"

Again I saw that deathly pallor creep over her face, but she left his question unanswered.

Instead, "You permit me to telephone?" she asked, and crossing to the instrument she rang up a number. "The number of the villa," she explained, "where our friend is now imprisoned. You may give it to the police—the nest will be empty when they arrive. Ah! I am through. Is that you, André? It is I, Inez. The little Belgian knows all. Send Halliday to the hotel, and clear out."

She replaced the receiver, and came towards us, smiling.

"You will accompany us to the hotel, madame."

"Naturally. I expected that."

I got a taxi, and we drove off together. I could see by Poirot's face that he was perplexed. The thing was almost too easy. We arrived at the hotel. The porter came up to us.

"A gentleman has arrived. He is in your rooms. He seems very ill. A nurse came with him, but she has left."

"That is all right," said Poirot, "he is a friend of mine."

We went upstairs together. Sitting in a chair by the window was a haggard young fellow who looked in the last stages of exhaustion. Poirot went over to him.

"Are you John Halliday?" The man nodded. "Show me your left arm. John Halliday has a mole just below the left elbow."

The man stretched out his arm. The mole was there. Poirot bowed to the countess. She turned and left the room.

A glass of brandy revived Halliday somewhat.

"My God!" he muttered. "I have been through hell—hell. . . . Those fiends are devils incarnate. My wife, where is she? What does she think? They told me that she would believe—would believe——"

"She does not," said Poirot firmly. "Her faith in you has never wavered. She is waiting for you—she and the child."

"Thank God for that. I can hardly believe that I am free once more."

"Now that you are a little recovered, monsieur,

I should like to hear the whole story from the beginning."

Halliday looked at him with an indescribable expression.

"I remember—nothing," he said.

"What?"

"Have you ever heard of the Big Four?"

"Something of them," said Poirot dryly.

"You do not know what I know. They have unlimited power. If I remain silent, I shall be safe—if I say one word—not only I, but my nearest and dearest will suffer unspeakable things. It is no good arguing with me. *I know*. . . . I remember—nothing."

And, getting up, he walked from the room.

Poirot's face wore a baffled expression.

"So it is like that, is it?" he muttered. "The Big Four win again. What is that you are holding in your hand, Hastings?"

I handed it to him.

"The countess scribbled it before she left," explained.

He read it.

"Au revoir.—I.V."

"Signed with her initials—I.V. Just a coincidence, perhaps, that they also stand for *Four*. I wonder, Hastings, I wonder."

CHAPTER VII

THE RADIUM THIEVES

ON the night of his release, Halliday slept in the room next to ours at the hotel, and all night long I heard him moaning and protesting in his sleep. Undoubtedly his experience in the villa had broken his nerve, and in the morning we failed completely to extract any information from him. He would only repeat his statement about the unlimited power at the disposal of the Big Four, and his assurance of the vengeance which would follow if he talked.

After lunch he departed to rejoin his wife in England, but Poirot and I remained behind in Paris. I was all for energetic proceedings of some kind or other, and Poirot's quiescence annoyed me.

"For Heaven's sake, Poirot," I urged, "let us be up and at them."

"Admirable, *mon ami*, admirable! Up where, and at whom? Be precise, I beg of you."

"At the Big Four, of course."

"*Cela va sans dire.* But how would you set about it?"

"The police," I hazarded doubtfully.

Poirot smiled.

"They would accuse us of romancing. We have nothing to go upon—nothing whatever. We must wait."

"Wait for what?"

"Wait for them to make a move. See now, in England you all comprehend and adore *le boxe*. If one man does not make a move, the other must, and by permitting the adversary to make the attack one learns something about him. That is our part—to let the other side make the attack."

"You think they will?" I said doubtfully.

"I have no doubt whatever of it. To begin with, see, they try to get me out of England. That fails. Then, in the Dartmoor affair, we step in and save their victim from the gallows. And yesterday, once again, we interfere with their plans. Assuredly, they will not leave the matter there."

As I reflected on this, there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for a reply, a man stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He was a tall, thin man, with a slightly hooked nose and a sallow complexion. He wore

an overcoat buttoned up to his chin, and a soft hat well pulled down over his eyes.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, for my somewhat unceremonious entry," he said in a soft voice, "but my business is of a rather unorthodox nature."

Smiling, he advanced to the table and sat down by it. I was about to spring up, but Poirot restrained me with a gesture.

"As you say, monsieur, your entry is somewhat unceremonious. Will you kindly state your business?"

"My dear M. Poirot, it is very simple. You have been annoying my friends."

"In what way?"

"Come, come, Monsieur Poirot. You do not seriously ask me that? You know as well as I do."

"It depends, monsieur, upon who these friends of yours are."

Without a word, the man drew from his pocket a cigarette case, and, opening it, took out four cigarettes and tossed them on the table. Then he picked them up and returned them to his case, which he replaced in his pocket.

"Aha!" said Poirot, "so it is like that, is it? And what do your friends suggest?"

"They suggest, monsieur, that you should

employ your talents—your very considerable talents—in the detection of legitimate crime—return to your former avocations, and solve the problems of London society ladies.”

“A peaceful programme,” said Poirot. “And supposing I do not agree?”

The man made an eloquent gesture.

“We should regret it, of course, exceedingly,” he said. “So would all the friends and admirers of the great M. Hercule Poirot. But regrets, however poignant, do not bring a man to life again.”

“Put very delicately,” said Poirot, nodding his head. “And supposing I—accept?”

“In that case I am empowered to offer you—compensation.”

He drew out a pocket-book, and threw ten notes on the table. They were for ten thousand francs each.

“That is merely as a guarantee of our good faith,” he said. “Ten times that amount will be paid you.”

“Good God,” I cried, springing up, “you dare to think——!”

“Sit down, Hastings,” said Poirot autocratically. “Subdue your so beautiful and honest nature and sit down. To you, monsieur, I will say this. What is to prevent me ringing up

the police and giving you into their custody, whilst my friend here prevents you from escaping?"

"By all means do so if you think it advisable," said our visitor calmly.

"Oh! look here, Poirot," I cried. "I can't stand this. Ring up the police and have done with it."

Rising swiftly, I strode to the door and stood with my back against it.

"It seems the obvious course," murmured Poirot, as though debating with himself.

"But you distrust the obvious, eh?" said our visitor, smiling.

"Go on, Poirot," I urged.

"It will be your responsibility, *mon ami*."

As he lifted the receiver, the man made a sudden, cat-like jump at me. I was ready for him. In another minute we were locked together, staggering round the room. Suddenly I felt him slip and falter. I pressed my advantage. He went down before me. And then, in the very flush of victory, an extraordinary thing happened. I felt myself flying forwards. Head first, I crashed into the wall in a complicated heap. I was up in a minute, but the door was already closing behind my late adversary. I rushed to it and shook it, it was locked on

the outside. I seized the telephone from Poirot.

"Is that the bureau? Stop a man who is coming out. A tall man, with a buttoned-up overcoat and a soft hat. He is wanted by the police."

Very few minutes elapsed before we heard a noise in the corridor outside. The key was turned and the door flung open. The manager himself stood in the doorway.

"The man—you have got him?" I cried.

"No, monsieur. No one has descended."

"You must have passed him."

"We have passed no one, monsieur. It is incredible that he can have escaped."

"You have passed some one, I think," said Poirot, in his gentle voice. "One of the hotel staff, perhaps?"

"Only a waiter carrying a tray, monsieur."

"Ah!" said Poirot, in a tone that spoke infinities.

"So that was why he wore his overcoat buttoned up to his chin," mused Poirot, when we had finally got rid of the excited hotel officials.

"I'm awfully sorry, Poirot," I murmured, rather crestfallen. "I thought I'd downed him all right."

"Yes, that was a Japanese trick, I fancy. Do

not distress yourself, *mon ami*. All went according to plan—his plan. That is what I wanted.”

“What’s this?” I cried, pouncing on a brown object that lay on the floor.

It was a slim pocket-book of brown leather, and had evidently fallen from our visitor’s pocket during his struggle with me. It contained two receipted bills in the name of M. Felix Laon, and a folded-up piece of paper which made my heart beat faster. It was a half sheet of note-paper on which a few words were scrawled in pencil, but they were words of supreme importance.

“The next meeting of the council will be on Friday at 34 Rue des Echelles at 11 a.m.”

It was signed with a big figure 4.

And to-day was Friday, and the clock on the mantelpiece showed the hour to be 10.30.

“My God, what a chance!” I cried. “Fate is playing into our hands. We must start at once—though. What stupendous luck.”

“So that was why he came,” murmured Poirot. “I see it all now.”

“See what? Come on, Poirot, don’t stay day-dreaming there.”

Poirot looked at me, and slowly shook his head, smiling as he did so.

“‘Will you walk into my parlour, said the

spider to the fly?' That is your little English nursery rhyme, is it not? No, no—they are subtle—but not so subtle as Hercule Poirot.

"What on earth are you driving at, Poirot?"

"My friend, I have been asking myself the reason of this morning's visit. Did our visitor really hope to succeed in bribing me? Or, alternatively, in frightening me into abandoning my task? It seemed hardly credible. Why, then, did he come? And now I see the whole plan—very neat—very pretty—the ostensible reason to bribe or frighten me—the necessary struggle which he took no pains to avoid, and which should make the dropped pocket-book natural and reasonable—and finally—the pitfall! Rue des Eschelles, 11 a.m.? I think not, *mon ami*! One does not catch Hercule Poirot as easily as that."

"Good heavens," I gasped.

Poirot was frowning to himself.

"There is still one thing I do not understand."

"What is that?"

"The time, Hastings—the time. If they wanted to decoy me away, surely night time would be better? Why this early hour? Is it possible that something is about to happen this morning? Something which they are anxious Hercule Poirot should not know about?"

He shook his head.

"We shall see. Here I sit, *mon ami*. We do not stir out this morning. We await events here."

It was at half-past eleven exactly that the summons came. A *petit bleu*. Poirot tore it open, then handed it to me. It was from Madame Olivier, the world-famous scientist, whom we had visited yesterday in connection with the Halliday case. It asked us to come out to Passy at once.

We obeyed the summons without an instant's delay. Madame Olivier received us in the same small salon. I was struck anew with the wonderful power of this woman, with her long nun's face and burning eyes—this brilliant successor of Becquerel and the Curies. She came to the point at once.

"Messieurs, you interviewed me yesterday about the disappearance of M. Halliday. I now learn that you returned to the house a second time, and asked to see my secretary, Inez Veroneau. She left the house with you, and has not returned here since."

"Is that all, madame?"

"No, monsieur, it is not. Last night the laboratory was broken into, and several valuable papers and memoranda were stolen. The thieves

had a try for something more precious still, but luckily they failed to open the big safe."

"Madame, these are the facts of the case. Your late secretary, Madame Veroneau, was really the Countess Rossakoff, an expert thief, and it was she who was responsible for the disappearance of M. Halliday. How long had she been with you?"

"Five months, monsieur. What you say amazes me."

"It is true, nevertheless. These papers, were they easy to find? Or do you think an inside knowledge was shown?"

"It is rather curious that the thieves knew exactly where to look. You think Inez——"

"Yes, I have no doubt that it was upon her information that they acted. But what is this precious thing that the thieves failed to find? Jewels?"

Madame Olivier shook her head with a faint smile.

"Something much more precious than that, monsieur." She looked round her, then bent forward, lowering her voice. "Radium, monsieur."

"Radium?"

"Yes, monsieur. I am now at the crux of my experiments. I possess a small portion of radium

myself—more has been lent to me for the process I am at work upon. Small though the actual quantity is, it comprises a large amount of the world's stock and represents a value of millions of francs."

"And where is it?"

"In its leaden case in the big safe—the safe purposely appears to be of an old and worn-out pattern, but it is really a triumph of the safe-maker's art. That is probably why the thieves were unable to open it."

"How long are you keeping this radium in your possession?"

"Only for two days more, monsieur. Then my experiments will be concluded."

Poirot's eyes brightened.

"And Inez Veroneau is aware of the fact? Good—then our friends will come back. Not a word of me to any one, madame. But rest assured, I will save your radium for you. You have a key of the door leading from the laboratory to the garden?"

"Yes, monsieur. Here it is. I have a duplicate for myself. And here is the key of the garden door leading out into the alleyway between this villa and the next one."

"I thank you, madame. To-night, go to bed as usual, have no fears, and leave all to me.

But not a word to any one—not to your two assistants—Mademoiselle Claude and Monsieur Henri, is it not?—particularly not a word to them.”

Poirot left the villa rubbing his hands in great satisfaction.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked.

“Now, Hastings, we are about to leave Paris—for England.”

“What?”

“We will pack our effects, have lunch, and drive to the Gare du Nord.”

“But the radium?”

“I said we were going to leave for England—I did not say we were going to arrive there. Reflect a moment, Hastings. It is quite certain that we are being watched and followed. Our enemies must believe that we are going back to England, and they certainly will not believe that unless they see us get on board the train and start.”

“Do you mean we are to slip off again at the last minute?”

“No, Hastings. Our enemies will be satisfied with nothing less than a *bona fide* departure.”

“But the train doesn’t stop until Calais?”

“It will stop if it is paid to do so.”

"Oh, come now, Poirot—surely you can't pay an express to stop—they'd refuse."

"My dear friend, have you never remarked the little handle—the *signale d'arrêt*—penalty for improper use, 100 francs, I think?"

"Oh! you are going to pull that?"

"Or rather a friend of mine, Pierre Combeau, will do so. Then, while he is arguing with the guard, and making a big scene, and all the train is agog with interest, you and I will fade quietly away."

We duly carried out Poirot's plan. Pierre Combeau, an old crony of Poirot's, and who evidently knew my little friend's methods pretty well, fell in with the arrangements. The communication cord was pulled just as we got to the outskirts of Paris. Combeau "made a scene" in the most approved French fashion, and Poirot and I were able to leave the train without any one being interested in our departure. Our first proceeding was to make a considerable change in our appearance. Poirot had brought the materials for this with him in a small case. Two loafers in dirty blue blouses were the result. We had dinner in an obscure hostelry, and started back to Paris afterwards.

It was close on eleven o'clock when we found ourselves once more in the neighbourhood of

Madame Olivier's villa. We looked up and down the road before slipping into the alleyway. The whole place appeared to be perfectly deserted. One thing we could be quite certain of, no one was following us.

"I do not expect them to be here yet," whispered Poirot to me. "Possibly they may not come until to-morrow night, but they know perfectly well that there are only two nights on which the radium will be there."

Very cautiously we turned the key in the garden door. It opened noiselessly and we stepped into the garden.

And then, with complete unexpectedness, the blow fell. In a minute we were surrounded, gagged and bound. At least ten men must have been waiting for us. Resistance was useless. Like two helpless bundles we were lifted up and carried along. To my intense astonishment, they took us *towards* the house and not away from it. With a key they opened the door into the laboratory and carried us into it. One of the men stooped down before the big safe. The door of it swung open. I felt an unpleasant sensation down my spine. Were they going to bundle us into it, and leave us there to asphyxiate slowly?

However, to my amazement, I saw that from

the inside of the safe steps led down beneath the floor. We were thrust down this narrow way and eventually came out into a big subterranean chamber. A woman stood there, tall and imposing, with a black velvet mask covering her face. She was clearly in command of the situation by her gestures of authority. The men slung us down on the floor and left us—alone with the mysterious creature in the mask. I had no doubt who she was. This was the unknown Frenchwoman—Number Three of the Big Four.

She knelt down beside us and removed the gags, but left us bound, then rising and facing us, with a sudden swift gesture she removed her mask.

It was Madame Olivier !

“ M. Poirot,” she said, in a low mocking tone. “ The great, the wonderful, the unique M. Poirot. I sent a warning to you yesterday morning. You chose to disregard it—you thought you could pit your wits against US. And now, you are here ! ”

There was a cold malignity about her that froze me to the marrow. It was so at variance with the burning fire of her eyes. She was mad—mad—with the madness of genius !

Poirot said nothing. His jaw had dropped, and he was staring at her.

"Well," she said softly, "this is the end. WE cannot permit our plans to be interfered with. Have you any last request to make?"

Never before, or since, have I felt so near death. Poirot was magnificent. He neither flinched nor paled, just stared at her with unabated interest.

"Your psychology interests me enormously, madame," he said quietly. "It is a pity that I have so short a time to devote to studying it. Yes, I have a request to make. A condemned man is always allowed a last smoke, I believe. I have my cigarette case on me. If you would permit——" He looked down at his bonds.

"Ah, yes!" she laughed. "You would like me to untie your hands, would you not? You are clever, M. Hercule Poirot, I know that. I shall not untie your hands—but I will find you a cigarette."

She knelt down by him, extracted his cigarette case, took out a cigarette, and placed it between his lips.

"And now a match," she said, rising.

"It is not necessary, madame." Something in his voice startled me. She, too, was arrested.

"Do not move, I pray of you, madame. You

will regret it if you do. Are you acquainted at all with the properties of cuare? The South American Indians use it as an arrow poison. A scratch with it means death. Some tribes use a little blow-pipe—I, too, have a little blow-pipe constructed so as to look exactly like a cigarette. I have only to blow. . . . Ah! you start. Do not move, madame. The mechanism of this cigarette is most ingenious. One blows—and a tiny dart resembling a fish-bone flies through the air—to find its mark. You do not wish to die, madame. Therefore, I beg of you, release my friend Hastings from his bonds. I cannot use my hands, but I can turn my head—so—you are still covered, madame. Make no mistake, I beg of you.”

Slowly, with shaking hands, and rage and hate convulsing her face, she bent down and did his bidding. I was free. Poirot’s voice gave me instructions.

“Your bonds will now do for the lady, Hastings. That is right. Is she securely fastened? Then release me, I pray of you. It is a fortunate circumstance she sent away her henchmen. With a little luck we may hope to find the way out unobstructed.”

In another minute, Poirot stood by my side. He bowed to the lady.

"Hercule Poirot is not killed so easily, madame. I wish you good-night."

The gag prevented her from replying, but the murderous gleam in her eyes frightened me. I hoped devoutly that we should never fall into her power again.

Three minutes later we were outside the villa, and hurriedly traversing the garden. The road outside was deserted, and we were soon clear of the neighbourhood.

Then Poirot broke out.

"I deserve all that that woman said to me. I am a triple imbecile, a miserable animal, thirty-six times an idiot. I was proud of myself for not falling into their trap. And it was not even meant as a trap—except exactly in the way in which I fell into it. They knew I would see through it—they counted on my seeing through it. This explains all—the ease with which they surrendered Halliday—everything. Madame Olivier was the ruling spirit—Vera Rossakoff only her lieutenant. Madame needed Halliday's ideas—she herself had the necessary genius to supply the gaps that perplexed him. Yes, Hastings, we know now who Number Three is—the woman who is probably the greatest scientist in the world! Think of it. The brain of the East, the science of the West—and two

others whose identities we do not yet know. But we must find out. To-morrow we will return to London and set about it."

"You are not going to denounce Madame Olivier to the police?"

"I should not be believed. That woman is one of the idols of France. And we can prove nothing. We are lucky if she does not denounce *us*."

"What?"

"Think of it. We are found at night upon the premises with keys in our possession which she will swear she never gave us. She surprises us at the safe, and we gag and bind her and make away. Have no illusions, Hastings. The boot is not upon the right leg—is that how you say it?"

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE HOUSE OF THE ENEMY

AFTER our adventure in the villa at Passy, we returned post haste to London. Several letters were awaiting Poirot. He read one of them with a curious smile, and then handed it to me.

"Read this, *mon ami*."

I turned first to the signature, "Abe Ryland," and recalled Poirot's words: "the richest man in the world." Mr. Ryland's letter was curt and incisive. He expressed himself as profoundly dissatisfied with the reasons Poirot had given for withdrawing from the South American proposition at the last moment.

"This gives one furiously to think, does it not?" said Poirot.

"I suppose it's only natural he should be a bit ratty."

"No, no, you comprehend not. Remember the words of Mayerling, the man who took refuge here—only to die by the hands of his enemies. 'Number Two is represented by an S with two lines through it—the sign for a dollar,

also by two stripes and a star. It may be conjectured therefore that he is an American subject, and that he represents the power of wealth.' Add to those words the fact that Ryland offered me a huge sum to tempt me out of England—and—and what about it, Hastings?"

"You mean," I said, staring, "that you suspect Abe Ryland, the multi-millionaire, of being Number Two of the Big Four."

"Your bright intellect has grasped the idea, Hastings. Yes, I do. The tone in which you said multi-millionaire was eloquent—but let me impress upon you one fact—this thing is being run by men at the top—and Mr. Ryland has the reputation of being no beauty in his business dealings. An able, unscrupulous man, a man who has all the wealth that he needs, and is out for unlimited power."

There was undoubtedly something to be said for Poirot's view. I asked him when he had made up his mind definitely upon the point.

"That is just it. I am not sure. I cannot be sure. *Mon ami*, I would give anything to *know*. Let me but place Number Two definitely as Abe Ryland, and we draw nearer to our goal."

"He has just arrived in London, I see by this," I said, tapping the letter. "Shall you call upon him, and make your apologies in person?"

"I might do so."

Two days later, Poirot returned to our rooms in a state of boundless excitement. He grasped me by both hands in his most impulsive manner.

"My friend, an occasion stupendous, unprecedented, never to be repeated, has presented itself! But there is danger, grave danger. I should not even ask you to attempt it."

If Poirot was trying to frighten me, he was going the wrong way to work, and so I told him. Becoming less incoherent, he unfolded his plan.

It seemed that Ryland was looking for an English secretary, one with a good social manner and presence. It was Poirot's suggestion that I should apply for the post.

"I would do it, myself, *mon ami*," he explained apologetically. "But, see you, it is almost impossible for me to disguise myself in the needful manner. I speak the English very well—except when I am excited—but hardly so as to deceive the ear; and even though I were to sacrifice my moustaches, I doubt not but that I should still be recognisable as Hercule Poirot."

I doubted it also, and declared myself ready and willing to take up the part and penetrate into Ryland's household.

"Ten to one he won't engage me anyway," I remarked.

"Oh, yes, he will. I will arrange for you such testimonials as shall make him lick his lips. The Home Secretary himself shall recommend you."

This seemed to be carrying things a bit far, but Poirot waved aside my remonstrances.

"Oh, yes, he will do it. I investigated for him a little matter which might have caused a grave scandal. All was solved with discretion and delicacy, and now, as you would say, he perches upon my hand like the little bird and pecks the crumbs."

Our first step was to engage the services of an artist in "make up." He was a little man, with a quaint bird-like turn of the head, not unlike Poirot's own. He considered me some time in silence, and then fell to work. When I looked at myself in the glass half an hour afterwards, I was amazed. Special shoes caused me to stand at least two inches taller, and the coat I wore was arranged so as to give me a long, lank, weedy look. My eyebrows had been cunningly altered, giving a totally different expression to my face, I wore pads in my cheeks, and the deep tan of my face was a thing of the past. My moustache had gone, and a gold

tooth was prominent on one side of my mouth.

"Your name," said Poirot, "is Arthur Neville. God guard you, my friend—for I fear that you go into perilous places."

It was with a beating heart that I presented myself at the Savoy, at an hour named by Mr. Ryland, and asked to see the great man.

After being kept waiting a minute or two, I was shown upstairs to his suite.

Ryland was sitting at a table. Spread out in front of him was a letter which I could see out of the tail of my eye was in the Home Secretary's handwriting. It was my first sight of the American millionaire, and, in spite of myself, I was impressed. He was tall and lean, with a jutting out chin and slightly hooked nose. His eyes glittered cold and gray behind penthouse brows. He had thick grizzled hair, and a long black cigar (without which, I learned later, he was never seen) protruded rakishly from the corner of his mouth.

"Siddown," he grunted.

I sat. He tapped the letter in front of him.

"According to this piece here, you're the goods all right, and I don't need to look further. Say, are you well up in the social matters?"

I said that I thought I could satisfy him in that respect.

"I mean to say, if I have a lot of dooks and earls and viscounts and suchlike down to the country place I've gotten, you'll be able to sort them out all right and put them where they should be round the dining table?"

"Oh! quite easily," I replied, smiling.

We exchanged a few more preliminaries, and then I found myself engaged. What Mr. Ryland wanted was a secretary conversant with English society, as he already had an American secretary and a stenographer with him.

Two days later I went down to Hatton Chase, the seat of the Duke of Loamshire, which the American millionaire had rented for a period of six months.

My duties gave me no difficulty whatever. At one period of my life I had been private secretary to a busy member of Parliament, so I was not called upon to assume a role unfamiliar to me. Mr. Ryland usually entertained a large party over the week-end, but the middle of the week was comparatively quiet. I saw very little of Mr. Appleby, the American secretary, but he seemed a pleasant, normal young American, very efficient in his work. Of Miss Martin, the stenographer, I saw rather more. She was a

pretty girl of about twenty-three or four, with auburn hair and brown eyes that could look mischievous enough upon occasion, though they were usually cast demurely down. I had an idea that she both disliked and distrusted her employer, though, of course, she was careful never to hint at anything of the kind, but the time came when I was unexpectedly taken into her confidence.

I had, of course, carefully scrutinised all the members of the household. One or two of the servants had been newly engaged, one of the footmen, I think, and some of the housemaids. The butler, the housekeeper, and the chef were the duke's own staff, who had consented to remain on in the establishment. The housemaids I dismissed as unimportant ; I scrutinised James, the second footman, very carefully ; but it was clear that he was an under-footman and an under-footman only. He had, indeed, been engaged by the butler. A person of whom I was far more suspicious was Deaves, Ryland's valet, whom he had brought over from New York with him. An Englishman by birth, with an irreproachable manner, I yet harboured vague suspicions about him.

I had been at Hatton Chase three weeks, and not an incident of any kind had arisen which I

could lay my finger on in support of our theory. There was no trace of the activities of the Big Four. Mr. Ryland was a man of overpowering force and personality, but I was coming to believe that Poirot had made a mistake when he associated him with that dread organisation. I even heard him mention Poirot in a casual way at dinner one night.

“Wonderful little man, they say. But he’s a quitter. How do I know? I put him on a deal, and he turned me down the last minute. I’m not taking any more of your Monsieur Hercule Poirot.”

It was at moments such as these that I felt my cheek pads most wearisome!

And then Miss Martin told me a rather curious story. Ryland had gone to London for the day, taking Appleby with him. Miss Martin and I were strolling together in the garden after tea. I liked the girl very much, she was so unaffected and so natural. I could see that there was something on her mind, and at last out it came.

“Do you know, Major Neville,” she said, “I am really thinking of resigning my post here.”

I looked somewhat astonished, and she went on hurriedly.

" Oh ! I know it's a wonderful job to have got, in a way. I suppose most people would think me a fool to throw it up. But I can't stand abuse, Major Neville. To be sworn at like a trooper is more than I can bear. No gentleman would do such a thing."

" Has Ryland been swearing at you ? "

She nodded.

" Of course, he's always rather irritable and short tempered. That one expects. It's all in the day's work. But to fly into such an absolute fury—over nothing at all. He really looked as though he could have murdered me ! And, as I say, over nothing at all ! "

" Tell me about it ? " I said, keenly interested.

" As you know, I open all Mr. Ryland's letters. Some I hand on to Mr. Appleby, others I deal with myself, but I do all the preliminary sorting. Now there are certain letters that come, written on blue paper, and with a tiny 4 marked on the corner—I beg your pardon, did you speak ? "

I had been unable to repress a stifled exclamation, but I hurriedly shook my head, and begged her to continue.

" Well, as I was saying, these letters come, and there are strict orders that they are never to be opened, but to be handed over to Mr.

Ryland intact. And, of course, I always do so. But there was an unusually heavy mail yesterday morning, and I was opening the letters in a terrific hurry. By mistake I opened one of these letters. As soon as I saw what I had done, I took it to Mr. Ryland and explained. To my utter amazement he flew into the most awful rage. As I tell you, I was quite frightened."

"What was there in the letter, I wonder, to upset him so?"

"Absolutely nothing—that's just the curious part of it. I had read it before I discovered my mistake. It was quite short. I can still remember it word for word, and there was nothing in it that could possibly upset any one."

"You can repeat it, you say?" I encouraged her.

"Yes." She paused a minute and then repeated slowly, whilst I noted down the words unobtrusively, the following :—

"DEAR SIR,—The essential thing now, I should say, is to see the property. If you insist on the quarry being included, then seventeen thousand seems reasonable. 11% commission too much, 4% is ample.

"Yours truly,

"ARTHUR LEVERSHAM."

Miss Martin went on :—

“ Evidently about some property Mr. Ryland was thinking of buying. But really, I do feel that a man who can get into a rage over such a trifle is, well, dangerous. What do you think I ought to do, Major Neville? You’ve more experience of the world than I have.”

I soothed the girl down, pointed out to her that Mr. Ryland had probably been suffering from the enemy of his race—dyspepsia. In the end I sent her away quite comforted. But I was not so easily satisfied myself. When the girl had gone, and I was alone, I took out my notebook, and ran over the letter which I had jotted down. What did it mean—this apparently innocent-sounding missive? Did it concern some business deal which Ryland was undertaking, and was he anxious that no details about it should leak out until it was carried through? That was a possible explanation. But I remembered the small figure 4 with which the envelopes were marked, and I felt that, at last, I was on the track of the thing we were seeking.

I puzzled over the letter all that evening, and most of the next day—and then suddenly the solution came to me. It was so simple, too. The figure 4 was the clue. Read every fourth word in the letter, and an entirely different message

appeared. "Essential should see you quarry seventeen eleven four."

The solution of the figures was easy. Seventeen stood for the seventeenth of October—which was to-morrow, eleven was the time, and four was the signature—either referring to the mysterious Number Four himself—or else it was the "trade-mark" so to speak, of the Big Four. The quarry was also intelligible. There was a big disused quarry on the estate about half a mile from the house—a lonely spot, ideal for a secret meeting.

For a moment or two I was tempted to run the show myself. It would be such a feather in my cap, for once, to have the pleasure of crowing over Poirot.

But in the end I overcame the temptation. This was a big business—I had no right to play a lone hand, and perhaps jeopardise our chances of success. For the first time, we had stolen a march upon our enemies. We must make good this time—and, disguise the fact as I might, Poirot had the better brain of the two.

I wrote off post haste to him, laying the facts before him, and explaining how urgent it was that we should overhear what went on at the interview. If he liked to leave it to me, well and good, but I gave him detailed instructions

how to reach the quarry from the station in case he should deem it wise to be present himself.

I took the letter down to the village and posted it myself. I had been able to communicate with Poirot throughout my stay, by the simple expedient of posting my letters myself, but we had agreed that he should not attempt to communicate with me in case my letters should be tampered with.

I was in a glow of excitement the following evening. No guests were staying in the house, and I was busy with Mr. Ryland in his study all the evening. I had foreseen that this would be the case, which was why I had had no hope of being able to meet Poirot at the station. I was, however, confident that I would be dismissed well before eleven o'clock.

Sure enough, just after ten-thirty, Mr. Ryland glanced at the clock, and announced that he was "through." I took the hint and retired discreetly. I went upstairs as though going to bed, but slipped quietly down a side staircase and let myself out into the garden, having taken the precaution to don a dark overcoat to hide my white shirt-front.

I had gone some way down the garden when I chanced to look over my shoulder. Mr. Ryland was just stepping out from his study window into

the garden. He was starting to keep the appointment. I redoubled my pace, so as to get a clear start. I arrived at the quarry somewhat out of breath. There seemed no one about, and I crawled into a thick tangle of bushes and awaited developments.

Ten minutes later, just on the stroke of eleven, Ryland stalked up, his hat over his eyes and the inevitable cigar in his mouth. He gave a quick look round, and then plunged into the hollows of the quarry below. Presently I heard a low murmur of voices come up to me. Evidently the other man—or men—whoever they were, had arrived first at the rendezvous. I crawled cautiously out of the bushes, and inch by inch, using the utmost precaution against noise, I wormed myself down the steep path. Only a boulder now separated me from the talking men. Secure in the blackness, I peeped round the edge of it and found myself facing the muzzle of a black, murderous-looking automatic!

“Hands up!” said Mr. Ryland succinctly. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

He was seated in the shadow of the rock, so that I could not see his face, but the menace in his voice was unpleasant. Then I felt a ring of cold steel on the back of my neck, and Ryland lowered his own automatic.

"That's right, George," he drawled. "March him around here."

Raging inwardly, I was conducted to a spot in the shadows, where the unseen George (whom I suspected of being the impeccable Deaves), gagged and bound me securely.

Ryland spoke again in a tone which I had difficulty in recognising, so cold and menacing was it.

"This is going to be the end of you two. You've got in the way of the Big Four once too often. Ever heard of land slides? There was one about here two years ago. There's going to be another to-night. I've fixed that good and square. Say, that friend of yours doesn't keep his dates very punctually."

A wave of horror swept over me. Poirot! In another minute he would walk straight into the trap. And I was powerless to warn him. I could only pray that he had elected to leave the matter in my hands, and had remained in London. Surely, if he had been coming, he would have been here by now.

With every minute that passed, my hopes rose.

Suddenly they were dashed to pieces. I heard footsteps — cautious footsteps, but footsteps nevertheless. I writhed in impotent agony. They

came down the path, paused, and then Poirot himself appeared, his head a little on one side, peering into the shadows.

I heard the growl of satisfaction Ryland gave as he raised the big automatic and shouted "Hands up." Deaves sprang forward as he did so, and took Poirot in the rear. The ambush was complete.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hercule Poirot," said the American grimly.

Poirot's self-possession was marvellous. He did not turn a hair. But I saw his eyes searching in the shadows.

"My friend? He is here?"

"Yes, you are both in the trap—the trap of the Big Four."

He laughed.

"A trap?" queried Poirot.

"Say, haven't you tumbled to it yet?"

"I comprehend that there is a trap—yes," said Poirot gently. "But you are in error, monsieur. It is *you* who are in it—not I and my friend."

"What?" Ryland raised the big automatic, but I saw his gaze falter.

"If you fire, you commit murder watched by ten pairs of eyes, and you will be hanged for it. This place is surrounded—has been for

the last hour—by Scotland Yard men. It is checkmate, Mr. Abe Ryland."

He uttered a curious whistle, and as though by magic, the place was alive with men. They seized Ryland and the valet and disarmed them. After speaking a few words to the officer in charge, Poirot took me by the arm, and led me away.

Once clear of the quarry he embraced me with vigour.

"You are alive—you are unhurt. It is magnificent. Often have I blamed myself for letting you go."

"I'm perfectly all right," I said, disengaging myself. "But I'm just a big fogged. You tumbled to their little scheme, did you?"

"But I was waiting for it! For what else did I permit you to go there? Your false name, your disguise, not for a moment was it intended to deceive!"

"What?" I cried. "You never told me."

"As I have frequently told you, Hastings, you have a nature so beautiful and so honest that unless you are yourself deceived, it is impossible for you to deceive others. Good, then, you are spotted from the first, and they do what I had counted on their doing—a mathematical certainty to any one who uses his gray cells properly—use you as a decoy. They set

the girl on—— By the way, *mon ami*, as an interesting fact psychologically, had she got red hair?"

"If you mean Miss Martin," I said coldly. "Her hair is a delicate shade of auburn, but——"

"They are *épatant*—these people! They have even studied your psychology. Oh! yes, my friend, Miss Martin was in the plot—very much so. She repeats the letter to you, together with her tale of Mr. Ryland's wrath, you write it down, you puzzle your brains—the cipher is nicely arranged, difficult, but not too difficult—you solve it, and you send for me."

"But what they do not know is that I am waiting for just this very thing to happen. I go post haste to Japp and arrange things. And so, as you see, all is triumph!"

I was not particularly pleased with Poirot, and I told him so. We went back to London on a milk train in the early hours of the morning, and a most uncomfortable journey it was.

I was just out of my bath and indulging in pleasurable thoughts of breakfast when I heard Japp's voice in the sitting-room. I threw on a bath-robe and hurried in.

"A pretty mare's nest you've got us into this time," Japp was saying. "It's too bad of you, M. Poirot. First time I've ever known you take a toss."

Poirot's face was a study. Japp went on.

"There were we, taking all this Black Hand stuff seriously—and all the time it was the footman."

"The footman?" I gasped.

"Yes, James, or whatever his name is. Seems he laid 'em a wager in the servants' hall that he could get taken for the old man by his nibs—that's you, Captain Hastings—and would hand him out a lot of spy stuff about a Big Four gang."

"Impossible!" I cried.

"Don't you believe it. I marched our gentleman straight to Hatton Chase, and there was the real Ryland in bed and asleep, and the butler and the cook and God knows how many of them to swear to the wager. Just a silly hoax—that's all it was—and the valet is with him."

"So that was why he kept in the shadow," murmured Poirot.

After Japp had gone we looked at each other.

"We *know*, Hastings," said Poirot at last. "Number Two of the Big Four is Abe Ryland. The masquerading on the part of the footman was to ensure a way of retreat in case of emergencies. And the footman——"

"Yes," I breathed.

"*Number Four*," said Poirot gravely.

CHAPTER IX

THE YELLOW JASMINE MYSTERY

It was all very well for Poirot to say that we were acquiring information all the time and gaining an insight into our adversaries' minds—I felt myself that I required some more tangible success than this.

Since we had come into contact with the Big Four, they had committed two murders, abducted Halliday, and had been within an ace of killing Poirot and myself ; whereas so far we had hardly scored a point in the game.

Poirot treated my complaints lightly.

"So far, Hastings," he said, "they laugh. That is true, but you have a proverb, have you not : ' He laughs best who laughs at the end ' ? And at the end, *mon ami*, you shall see.

"You must remember, too," he added, "that we deal with no ordinary criminal, but with the second greatest brain in the world."

I forbore to pander to his conceit by asking the obvious question. I knew the answer, at least I knew what Poirot's answer would be, and

instead I tried without success to elicit some information as to what steps he was taking to track down the enemy. As usual he had kept me completely in the dark as to his movements, but I gathered that he was in touch with secret service agents in India, China, and Russia, and, from his occasional bursts of self-glorification, that he was at least progressing in his favourite game of gauging his enemy's mind.

He had abandoned his private practice almost entirely, and I know that at this time he refused some remarkably handsome fees. True, he would sometimes investigate cases which intrigued him, but he usually dropped them the moment he was convinced that they had no connection with the activities of the Big Four.

This attitude of his was remarkably profitable to our friend, Inspector Japp. Undeniably he gained much kudos for solving several problems in which his success was really due to a half-contemptuous hint from Poirot.

In return for such service Japp supplied full details of any case which he thought might interest the little Belgian, and when he was put in charge of what the newspaper called "The Yellow Jasmine Mystery," he wired Poirot, asking him whether he would care to come down and look into the case.

It was in response to this wire that, about a month after my adventure in Abe Ryland's house, we found ourselves alone in a railway compartment whirling away from the smoke and dust of London, bound for the little town of Market Handford in Worcestershire, the seat of the mystery.

Poirot leant back in his corner.

"And what exactly is your opinion of the affair, Hastings?"

I did not at once reply to his question; I felt the need of going warily.

"It all seems so complicated," I said cautiously.

"Does it not?" said Poirot delightedly.

"I suppose our rushing off like this is a pretty clear sign that you consider Mr. Paynter's death to be murder—not suicide or the result of an accident?"

"No, no; you misunderstand me, Hastings. Granting that Mr. Paynter died as the result of a particularly terrible accident, there are still a number of mysterious circumstances to be explained."

"That was what I meant when I said it was all so complicated."

"Let us go over all the main facts quietly and methodically. Recount them to me, Hastings, in an orderly and lucid fashion."

I started forthwith, endeavouring to be as orderly and lucid as I could.

"We start," I said, "with Mr. Paynter. A man of fifty-five, rich, cultured, and somewhat of a globe-trotter. For the last twelve years he has been little in England, but suddenly tiring of incessant travelling, he bought a small place in Worcestershire, near Market Handforth, and prepared to settle down. His first action was to write to his only relative, a nephew, Gerald Paynter, the son of his younger brother, and to suggest to him that he should come and make his home at Croftlands (as the place is called) with his uncle. Gerald Paynter, who is an impecunious young artist, was glad enough to fall in with the arrangement, and had been living with his uncle for about seven months when the tragedy occurred."

"Your narrative style is masterly," murmured Poirot. "I say to myself, it is a book that talks, not my friend Hastings."

Paying no attention to Poirot, I went on, warming to the story.

"Mr. Paynter kept up a fair staff at Croftlands—six servants as well as his own Chinese body servant—Ah Ling."

"His Chinese servant, Ah Ling," murmured Poirot.

“On Tuesday last, Mr. Paynter complained of feeling unwell after dinner, and one of the servants was despatched to fetch the doctor. Mr. Paynter received the doctor in his study, having refused to go to bed. What passed between them was not then known, but before Doctor Quentin left, he asked to see the housekeeper, and mentioned that he had given Mr. Paynter a hypodermic injection as his heart was in a very weak state, recommended that he should not be disturbed, and then proceeded to ask some rather curious questions about the servants—how long they had been there, from whom they had come, etc.

“The housekeeper answered these questions as best she could, but was rather puzzled as to their purport. A terrible discovery was made on the following morning. One of the housemaids, on descending, was met by a sickening odour of burned flesh which seemed to come from her master’s study. She tried the door, but it was locked on the inside. With the assistance of Gerald Paynter and the Chinaman that was soon broken in, but a terrible sight greeted them. Mr. Paynter had fallen forward into the gas fire, and his face and head were charred beyond recognition.

“Of course, at the moment, no suspicion was

aroused as to its being anything but a ghastly accident. If blame attached to any one, it was to Doctor Quentin for giving his patient a narcotic and leaving him in such a dangerous position. And then a rather curious discovery was made.

“There was a newspaper on the floor, lying where it had slipped from the old man’s knees. On turning it over, words were found to be scrawled across it, feebly traced in ink. A writing-table stood close to the chair in which Mr. Paynter had been sitting, and the forefinger of the victim’s right hand was ink-stained up to the second joint. It was clear that, too weak to hold a pen, Mr. Paynter had dipped his finger in the ink-pot and managed to scrawl these two words across the surface of the newspaper he held—but the words themselves seemed utterly fantastic : *Yellow Jasmine*—just that and nothing more.

“Croftlands has a large quantity of yellow jasmine growing up its walls, and it was thought that this dying message had some reference to them, showing that the poor old man’s mind was wandering. Of course, the newspapers, agog for anything out of the common, took up the story hotly, calling it the Mystery of the Yellow Jasmine—though in all probability the words are completely unimportant.”

"They are unimportant, you say?" said Poirot. "Well, doubtless, since you say so, it must be so."

I regarded him dubiously, but I could detect no mockery in his eye.

"And then," I continued, "there came the excitements of the inquest."

"This is where you lick your lips, I perceive."

"There was a certain amount of feeling evidenced against Dr. Quentin. To begin with, he was not the regular doctor, only a locum, putting in a month's work, whilst Dr. Bolitho was away on a well-earned holiday. Then it was felt that his carelessness was the direct cause of the accident. But his evidence was little short of sensational. Mr. Paynter had been ailing in health ever since his arrival at Croftlands. Dr. Bolitho had attended him for some time, but when Dr. Quentin first saw his patient, he was mystified by some of the symptoms. He had only attended him once before the night when he was sent for after dinner. As soon as he was alone with Mr. Paynter, the latter had unfolded a surprising tale. To begin with, he was not feeling ill at all, he explained, but the taste of some curry that he had been eating at dinner had struck him as peculiar. Making an excuse to get rid of Ah Ling for a few minutes,

he had turned the contents of his plate into a bowl, and he now handed it over to the doctor with injunctions to find out if there were really anything wrong with it.

"In spite of his statement that he was not feeling ill, the doctor noted that the shock of his suspicions had evidently affected him, and that his heart was feeling it. Accordingly he administered an injection—not of a narcotic, but of strychnine.

"That, I think, completes the case—except for *the* crux of the whole thing—the fact that the uneaten curry, duly analysed, was found to contain enough powdered opium to have killed two men !"

I paused.

"And your conclusions, Hastings ?" asked Poirot quietly.

"It's difficult to say. It *might* be an accident—the fact that some one attempted to poison him the same night might be merely a coincidence."

"But you don't think so ? You prefer to believe it—murder !"

"Don't you ?"

"*Mon ami*, you and I do not reason in the same way. I am not trying to make up my mind between two opposite solutions—murder or

accident—that will come when we have solved the other problem—the mystery of the ‘Yellow Jasmine.’ By the way, you have left out something there.”

“You mean the two lines at right angles to each other faintly indicated under the words? I did not think they could be of any possible importance.”

“What you think is always so important to yourself, Hastings. But let us pass from the mystery of the Yellow Jasmine to the Mystery of the Curry.”

“I know. Who poisoned it? Why? There are a hundred questions one can ask. Ah Ling, of course, prepared it. But why should he wish to kill his master? Is he a member of a *tong*, or something like that. One reads of such things. The *tong* of the Yellow Jasmine, perhaps. Then there is Gerald Paynter.”

I came to an abrupt pause.

“Yes,” said Poirot, nodding his head. “There is Gerald Paynter, as you say. He is his uncle’s heir. He was dining out that night, though.”

“He might have got at some of the ingredients of the curry,” I suggested. “And he would take care to be out, so as not to have to partake of the dish.”

I think my reasoning rather impressed Poirot.

He looked at me with a more respectful attention than he had given me so far.

"He returns late," I mused, pursuing a hypothetical case. "Sees the light in his uncle's study, enters, and, finding his plan has failed, thrusts the old man down into the fire."

"Mr. Paynter, who was a fairly hearty man of fifty-five, would not permit himself to be burnt to death without a struggle, Hastings. Such a reconstruction is not feasible."

"Well, Poirot," I cried, "we're nearly there, I fancy. Let us hear what you think?"

Poirot threw me a smile, swelled out his chest, and began in a pompous manner.

"Assuming murder, the question at once arises, why choose that particular method? I can think of only one reason—to confuse identity, the face being charred beyond recognition."

"What?" I cried. "You think——"

"A moment's patience, Hastings. I was going on to say that I examine that theory. Is there any ground for believing that the body is not that of Mr. Paynter? Is there any one else whose body it possibly could be? I examine these two questions and finally I answer them both in the negative."

"Oh!" I said, rather disappointed. "And then?"

Poirot's eyes twinkled a little.

"And then I say to myself, "since there is here something that I do not understand, it would be well that I should investigate the matter. I must not permit myself to be wholly engrossed by the Big Four. Ah! we are just arriving. My little clothes brush, where does it hide itself? Here it is—brush me down, I pray you, my friend, and then I will perform the same service for you."

"Yes," said Poirot thoughtfully, as he put away the brush, "one must not permit oneself to be obsessed by one idea. I have been in danger of that. Figure to yourself, my friend, that even here, in this case, I am in danger of it. Those two lines you mentioned, a downstroke and a line at right angles to it, what are they but the beginning of a 4?"

"Good gracious, Poirot," I cried, laughing.

"Is it not absurd? I see the hand of the Big Four everywhere. It is well to employ one's wits in a totally different *milieu*. Ah! there is Japp come to meet us."

CHAPTER X

WE INVESTIGATE AT CROFTLANDS

THE Scotland Yard Inspector was, indeed, waiting on the platform, and greeted us warmly.

“ Well, Moosior Poirot, this is good. Thought you'd like to be let in on this. Tip-top mystery, isn't it ? ”

I read this aright as showing Japp to be completely puzzled and hoping to pick up a pointer from Poirot.

Japp had a car waiting, and we drove up in it to Croftlands. It was a square, white house, quite unpretentious, and covered with creepers, including the starry yellow jasmine. Japp looked up at it as we did.

“ Must have been balmy to go writing that, poor old cove,” he remarked. “ Hallucinations, perhaps, and thought he was outside.”

Poirot was smiling at him.

“ Which was it, my good Japp ? ” he asked ;
“ accident or murder ? ”

The Inspector seemed a little embarrassed by the question.

"Well, if it weren't for that curry business, I'd be for accident every time. There's no sense in holding a live man's head in the fire—why, he'd scream the house down."

"Ah!" said Poirot in a low voice. "Fool that I have been. Triple imbecile! You are a cleverer man than I am, Japp."

Japp was rather taken aback by the compliment—Poirot being usually given to exclusive self praise. He reddened and muttered something about there being a lot of doubt about that.

He led the way through the house to the room where the tragedy had occurred—Mr. Paynter's study. It was a wide, low room, with book-lined walls and big leather arm-chairs.

Poirot looked across at once to the window which gave upon a gravelled terrace.

"The window, it was unlatched?" he asked.

"That's the whole point, of course. When the doctor left this room, he merely closed the door behind him. The next morning it was found locked. Who locked it? Mr. Paynter? Ah Ling declares that the window was closed and bolted. Dr. Quentin, on the other hand, has an impression that it was closed, but not fastened, but he won't swear either way. If he

could, it would make a great difference. If the man *was* murdered, some one entered the room either through the door or the window—if through the door, it was an inside job ; if through the window, it might have been any one. First thing when they had broken the door down, they flung the window open, and the housemaid who did it thinks that it wasn't fastened, but she's a precious bad witness—will remember anything you ask her to ! ”

“ What about the key ? ”

“ There you are again. It was on the floor among the wreckage of the door. Might have fallen from the keyhole, might have been dropped there by one of the people who entered, might have been slipped underneath the door from the outside.”

“ In fact everything is ‘ might have been ’ ? ”

“ You've hit it, Moosior Poirot. That's just what it is.”

Poirot was looking round him, frowning unhappily.

“ I cannot see light,” he murmured. “ Just now—yes, I got a gleam, but now all is darkness once more. I have not the clue—the motive.”

“ Young Gerald Paynter had a pretty good motive,” remarked Japp grimly. “ He's been wild enough in his time, I can tell you. *And*

extravagant. You know what artists are, too—no morals at all."

Poirot did not pay much attention to Japp's sweeping strictures on the artistic temperament. Instead he smiled knowingly.

"My good Japp, is it possible that you throw the mud in my eyes? I know well enough that it is the Chinaman you suspect. But you are so artful. You want me to help you—and yet you drag the red kipper across the trail."

Japp burst out laughing.

"That's you all over, Mr. Poirot. Yes, I'd bet on the Chink, I'll admit it now. It stands to reason that it was he who doctored the curry, and if he'd try once in an evening to get his master out of the way, he'd try twice."

"I wonder if he would," said Poirot softly.

"But it's the motive that beats me. Some heathen revenge or other, I suppose."

"I wonder," said Poirot again. "There has been no robbery? Nothing has disappeared? No jewellery, or money, or papers?"

"No—that is, not exactly."

I pricked up my ears; so did Poirot.

"There's been no robbery, I mean," explained Japp. "But the old boy was writing a book of some sort. We only knew about it this morning when there was a letter from the publishers

asking about the manuscript. It was just completed, it seems. Young Paynter and I have searched high and low, but can't find a trace of it—he must have hidden it away somewhere.”

Poirot's eyes were shining with the green light I knew so well.

“How was it called, this book?” he asked.

“*The Hidden Hand in China*, I think it was called.”

“Aha!” said Poirot, with almost a gasp. Then he said quickly, “Let me see the Chinaman, Ah Ling.”

The Chinaman was sent for and appeared, shuffling along, with his eyes cast down, and his pigtail swinging. His impassive face showed no trace of any kind of emotion.

“Ah Ling,” said Poirot, “are you sorry your master is dead?”

“I welly sorry. He good master.”

“You know who kill him?”

“I not know. I tell pleeceman if I know.”

The questions and answers went on. With the same impassive face, Ah Ling described how he had made the curry. The cook had had nothing to do with it, he declared, no hand had touched it but his own. I wondered if he saw where his admission was leading him. He stuck to it too, that the window to the garden was

bolted that evening. If it was open in the morning, his master must have opened it himself. At last Poirot dismissed him.

"That will do, Ah Ling." Just as the Chinaman had got to the door, Poirot recalled him. "And you know nothing, you say, of the Yellow Jasmine?"

"No, what should I know?"

"Nor yet of the sign that was written underneath it?"

Poirot leant forward as he spoke, and quickly traced something on the dust of a little table. I was near enough to see it before he rubbed it out. A down stroke, a line at right angles, and then a second line down which completed a big 4. The effect on the Chinaman was electrical. For one moment his face was a mask of terror. Then, as suddenly, it was impassive again, and repeating his grave disclaimer, he withdrew.

Japp departed in search of young Paynter, and Poirot and I were left alone together.

"The Big Four, Hastings," cried Poirot. "Once again, the Big Four. Paynter was a great traveller. In his book there was doubtless some vital information concerning the doings of Number One, Li Chang Yen, the head and brains of the Big Four."

"But who—how——"

"Hush, here they come."

Gerald Paynter was an amiable, rather weak-looking young man. He had a soft brown beard, and a peculiar flowing tie. He answered Poirot's questions readily enough.

"I dined out with some neighbours of ours, the Wycherlys," he explained. "What time did I get home? Oh, about eleven. I had a latch-key, you know. All the servants had gone to bed, and I naturally thought my uncle had done the same. As a matter of fact, I did think I caught sight of that soft-footed Chinese beggar Ah Ling just whisking round the corner of the hall, but I fancy I was mistaken."

"When did you last see your uncle, Mr. Paynter? I mean before you came to live with him."

"Oh! not since I was a kid of ten. He and his brother (my father) quarrelled, you know."

"But he found you again with very little trouble, did he not? In spite of all the years that had passed?"

"Yes, it was quite a bit of luck my seeing the lawyer's advertisement."

Poirot asked no more questions.

Our next move was to visit Dr. Quentin. His story was substantially the same as he had told at the inquest, and he had little to add to it.

He received us in his surgery, having just come to the end of his consulting patients. He seemed an intelligent man. A certain primness of manner went well with his pince-nez, but I fancied that he would be thoroughly modern in his methods.

"I wish I could remember about the window," he said frankly. "But it's dangerous to think back, one becomes quite positive about something that never existed. That's psychology, isn't it, M. Poirot? You see, I've read all about your methods, and I may say I'm an enormous admirer of yours. No, I suppose it's pretty certain that the Chinaman put the powdered opium in the curry, but he'll never admit it, and we shall never know why. But holding a man down in a fire—that's not in keeping with our Chinese friend's character, it seems to me."

I commented on this last point to Poirot as we walked down the main street of Market Handford.

"Do you think he let a confederate in?" I asked. "By the way, I suppose Japp can be trusted to keep an eye on him?" (The Inspector had passed into the police station on some business or other.) "The emissaries of the Big Four are pretty spry."

"Japp is keeping an eye on both of them,"

said Poirot grimly. "They have been closely shadowed ever since the body was discovered."

"Well, at any rate *we* know that Gerald Paynter had nothing to do with it."

"You always know so much more than I do, Hastings, that it becomes quite fatiguing."

"You old fox," I laughed. "You never will commit yourself."

"To be honest, Hastings, the case is now quite clear to me—all but the words, *Yellow Jasmine*—and I am coming to agree with you that they have no bearing on the crime. In a case of this kind, you have got to make up your mind who is lying. I have done that. And yet——"

He suddenly darted from my side and entered an adjacent bookshop. He emerged a few minutes later, hugging a parcel. Then Japp rejoined us, and we all sought quarters at the inn.

I slept late the next morning. When I descended to the sitting-room reserved for us, I found Poirot already there, pacing up and down, his face contorted with agony.

"Do not converse with me," he cried, waving an agitated hand. "Not until I know that all is well—that the arrest is made. Ah! but my psychology has been weak. Hastings, if a man writes a dying message, it is because it is

important. Every one has said—‘Yellow Jasmine? There is yellow jasmine growing up the house—it means nothing.’”

“Well, what does it mean? Just what it says. Listen.” He held up a little book he was holding.

“My friend, it struck me that it would be well to inquire into the subject. What exactly is yellow jasmine? This little book has told me. Listen.”

He read.

“*Gelsemini Radix*. Yellow Jasmine. Composition: Alkaloids *gelseminine* $C_{22}H_{26}N_2O_3$, a potent poison acting like coniine; *gelsemine* $C_{12}H_{14}NO_2$, acting like strychnine; *gelsemic acid*, etc. Gelsemium is a powerful depressant to the central nervous system. At a late stage in its action it paralyses the motor nerve endings, and in large doses causes giddiness and loss of muscular power. Death is due to paralysis of the respiratory centre.”

“You see, Hastings? At the beginning I had an inkling of the truth when Japp made his remark about a live man being forced into the fire. I realised then that it was a dead man who was burned.”

“But why? What was the point?”

“My friend, if you were to shoot a man, or

stab a man after he were dead, or even knock him on the head, it would be apparent that the injuries were inflicted after death. But with his head charred to a cinder, no one is going to hunt about for obscure causes of death, and a man who has apparently just escaped being poisoned at dinner, is not likely to be poisoned just afterwards. *Who* is lying, that is always the question? I decided to believe Ah Ling——”

“What !” I exclaimed.

“You are surprised, Hastings? Ah Ling knew of the existence of the Big Four, that was evident—so evident that it was clear he knew nothing of their association with the crime until that moment. Had he been the murderer, he would have been able to retain his impassive face perfectly. So I decided then, to believe Ah Ling, and I fixed my suspicions on Gerald Paynter. It seemed to me that Number Four would have found an impersonation of a long lost nephew very easy.”

“What !” I cried. “Number Four?”

“No, Hastings, *not* Number Four. As soon as I had read up the subject of yellow jasmine, I saw the truth. In fact, it leapt to the eye.”

“As always,” I said coldly, “it doesn’t leap to mine.”

“Because you will not use your little gray

cells. Who had a chance to tamper with the curry ? ”

“ Ah Ling. No one else.”

“ No one else ? *What about the doctor ?* ”

“ But that was *afterwards*.”

“ Of course it was afterwards. There was no trace of powdered opium in the curry served to Mr. Paynter, but acting in obedience to the suspicions Dr. Quentin had aroused, the old man eats none of it, and preserves it to give to his medical attendant, whom he summons according to plan. Dr. Quentin arrives, takes charge of the curry, *and gives Mr. Paynter an injection*—of strychnine, he says, but really of yellow jasmine—a poisonous dose. When the drug begins to take effect, he departs, after unlatching the window. Then, in the night, he returns by the window, finds the manuscript, and shoves Mr. Paynter into the fire. He does not heed the newspaper that drops to the floor and is covered by the old man’s body. Paynter knew what drug he had been given, and strove to accuse the Big Four of his murder. It is easy for Quentin to mix powdered opium with the curry before handing it over to be analysed. He gives his version of the conversation with the old man, and mentions the strychnine injection casually, in case the mark of the hypodermic

needle is noticed. Suspicion at once is divided between accident and the guilt of Ah Ling owing to the poison in the curry."

"But Dr. Quentin cannot be Number Four?"

"I fancy he can. There is undoubtedly a real Dr. Quentin who is probably abroad somewhere. Number Four has simply masqueraded as him for a short time. The arrangements with Dr. Bolitho were all carried out by correspondence, the man who was to do locum originally having been taken ill at the last minute."

At that minute, Japp burst in, very red in the face.

"You have got him?" cried Poirot anxiously.

Japp shook his head, very out of breath.

"Bolitho came back from his holiday this morning—recalled by telegram. No one knows who sent it. The other man left last night. We'll catch him yet, though."

Poirot shook his head quietly.

"I think not," he said, and absentmindedly he drew a big 4 on the table with a fork.

CHAPTER XI

A CHESS PROBLEM

POIROT and I often dined at a small restaurant in Soho. We were there one evening, when we observed a friend at an adjacent table. It was Inspector Japp, and as there was room at our table, he came and joined us. It was some time since either of us had seen him.

"Never do you drop in to see us nowadays," declared Poirot reproachfully. "Not since the affair of the Yellow Jasmine have we met, and that is nearly a month ago."

"I've been up north—that's why. How are things with you? Big Four still going strong—eh?"

Poirot shook a finger at him reproachfully.

"Ah! you mock yourself at me—but the Big Four—they exist."

"Oh! I don't doubt that—but they're not the hub of the universe, as you make out."

"My friend, you are very much mistaken. The greatest power for evil in the world to-day is this 'Big Four.' To what end they are tending,

no one knows, but there has never been another such criminal organisation. The finest brain in China at the head of it, an American millionaire, and a French woman scientist as members, and for the fourth——”

Japp interrupted.

“I know—I know. Regular bee in your bonnet over it all. It’s becoming your little mania, Moosior Poirot. Let’s talk of something else for a change. Take any interest in chess?”

“I have played it, yes.”

“Did you see that curious business yesterday? Match between two players of world-wide reputation, and one died during the game?”

“I saw a mention of it. Dr. Savaronoff, the Russian champion, was one of the players, and the other, who succumbed to heart failure, was the brilliant young American, Gilmour Wilson.”

“Quite right. Savaronoff beat Rubinstein and became Russian champion some years ago. Wilson is said to be a second Capablanca.”

“A very curious occurrence,” mused Poirot. “If I mistake not, you have a particular interest in the matter?”

Japp gave a rather embarrassed laugh.

“You’ve hit it, Moosior Poirot. I’m puzzled. Wilson was sound as a bell—no trace of heart trouble. His death is quite inexplicable.”

"You suspect Dr. Savaronoff of putting him out of the way?" I cried.

"Hardly that," said Japp dryly. "I don't think even a Russian would murder another man in order not to be beaten at chess—and anyway, from all I can make out, the boot was likely to be on the other leg. The doctor is supposed to be very hot stuff—second to Lasker they say he is."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Then what exactly is your little idea?" he asked. "Why should Wilson be poisoned? For, I assume, of course, that it is poison you suspect."

"Naturally. Heart failure means your heart stops beating—that's all there is to that. That's what a doctor says officially at the moment, but privately he tips us the wink that he's not satisfied."

"When is the autopsy to take place?"

"To-night. Wilson's death was extraordinarily sudden. He seemed quite as usual and was actually moving one of the pieces when he suddenly fell forward—dead!"

"There are very few poisons would act in such a fashion," objected Poirot.

"I know. The autopsy will help us, I expect. But why should any one want Gilmour Wilson

out of the way—that's what I'd like to know? Harmless unassuming young fellow. Just come over here from the States, and apparently hadn't an enemy in the world."

"It seems incredible," I mused.

"Not at all," said Poirot, smiling. "Japp has his theory, I can see."

"I have, Moosior Poirot. I don't believe the poison was meant for Wilson—it was meant for the other man."

"Savaronoff?"

"Yes. Savaronoff fell foul of the Bolsheviks at the outbreak of the Revolution. He was even reported killed. In reality he escaped, and for three years endured incredible hardships in the wilds of Siberia. His sufferings were so great that he is now a changed man. His friends and acquaintances declare they would hardly have recognised him. His hair is white, and his whole aspect that of a man terribly aged. He is a semi-invalid, and seldom goes out, living alone with a niece, Sonia Daviloff, and a Russian manservant in a flat down Westminster way. It is possible that he still considers himself a marked man. Certainly he was very unwilling to agree to this chess contest. He refused several times point blank, and it was only when the newspapers took it up and began making a fuss about the

'unsportsmanlike refusal' that he gave in. Gilmour Wilson had gone on challenging him with real Yankee pertinacity, and in the end he got his way. Now I ask you, Moosior Poirot, why wasn't he willing? Because he didn't want attention drawn to him. Didn't want somebody or other to get on his track. That's my solution—Gilmour Wilson got pipped by mistake."

"There is no one who has any private reason to gain by Savaronoff's death?"

"Well, his niece, I suppose. He's recently come into an immense fortune. Left him by Madame Gospoja whose husband was a sugar profiteer under the old regime. They had an affair together once, I believe, and she refused steadfastly to credit the reports of his death."

"Where did the match take place?"

"In Savaronoff's own flat. He's an invalid, as I told you."

"Many people there to watch it?"

"At least a dozen—probably more."

Poirot made an expressive grimace.

"My poor Japp, your task is not an easy one."

"Once I know definitely that Wilson was poisoned, I can get on."

"Has it occurred to you that, in the meantime,

supposing your assumption that Savaronoff was the intended victim to be correct, the murderer may try again ? ”

“ Of course it has. Two men are watching Savaronoff’s flat.”

“ That will be very useful if any one should call with a bomb under his arm,” said Poirot dryly.

“ You’re getting interested, Moosior Poirot,” said Japp, with a twinkle. “ Care to come round to the mortuary and see Wilson’s body before the doctors start on it ? Who knows, his tie-pin may be askew, and that may give you a valuable clue that will solve the mystery.”

“ My dear Japp, all through dinner my fingers have been itching to rearrange your own tie-pin. You permit, yes ? Ah ! that is much more pleasing to the eye. Yes, by all means, let us go to the mortuary.”

I could see that Poirot’s attention was completely captivated by this new problem. It was so long since he had shown any interest over any outside case that I was quite rejoiced to see him back in his old form.

For my own part, I felt a deep pity as I looked down upon the motionless form and convulsed face of the hapless young American who had come by his death in such a strange way. Poirot

examined the body attentively. There was no mark on it anywhere, except a small scar on the left hand.

"And the doctor says that's a burn, not a cut," explained Japp.

Poirot's attention shifted to the contents of the dead man's pockets which a constable spread out for our inspection. There was nothing much—a handkerchief, keys, note-case filled with notes, and some unimportant letters. But one object standing by itself filled Poirot with interest.

"A chessman!" he exclaimed. "A white bishop. Was that in his pocket?"

"No, clasped in his hand. We had quite a difficulty to get it out of his fingers. It must be returned to Dr. Savaronoff sometime. It's part of a very beautiful set of carved ivory chessmen."

"Permit me to return it to him. It will make an excuse for my going there."

"Aha!" cried Japp. "So you want to come in on this case?"

"I admit it. So skilfully have you aroused my interest."

"That's fine. Got you away from your brooding. Captain Hastings is pleased, too, I can see."

"Quite right," I said, laughing.

Poirot turned back towards the body.

"No other little detail you can tell me about—him?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

"Not even—that he was left-handed?"

"You're a wizard, Moosior Poirot. How did you know that? He *was* left-handed. Not that it's anything to do with the case."

"Nothing whatever," agreed Poirot hastily, seeing that Japp was slightly ruffled. "My little joke—that was all. I like to play you the trick, see you."

We went out upon an amicable understanding.

The following morning saw us wending our way to Dr. Savaronoff's flat in Westminster.

"Sonia Daviloff," I mused. "It's a pretty name."

Poirot stopped, and threw me a look of despair.

"Always looking for romance! You are incorrigible. It would serve you right if Sonia Daviloff turned out to be our friend and enemy the Countess Vera Rossakoff."

At the mention of the countess, my face clouded over.

"Surely, Poirot, you don't suspect——"

"But, no, no. It was a joke! I have not the

Big Four on the brain to that extent, whatever Japp may say."

The door of the flat was opened to us by a man-servant with a peculiarly wooden face. It seemed impossible to believe that that impassive countenance could ever display emotion.

Poirot presented a card on which Japp had scribbled a few words of introduction, and we were shown into a low, long room furnished with rich hangings and curios. One or two wonderful ikons hung upon the walls, and exquisite Persian rugs lay upon the floor. A samovar stood upon a table.

I was examining one of the ikons which I judged to be of considerable value, and turned to see Poirot prone upon the floor. Beautiful as the rug was, it hardly seemed to me to necessitate such close attention.

"Is it such a very wonderful specimen?" I asked.

"Eh? Oh! the rug? But no, it was not the rug I was remarking. But it *is* a beautiful specimen, far too beautiful to have a large nail wantonly driven through the middle of it. No, Hastings," as I came forward, "the nail is not there now. But the hole remains."

A sudden sound behind us made me spin round, and Poirot spring nimbly to his feet. A

girl was standing in the doorway. Her eyes, full upon us, were dark with suspicion. She was of medium height, with a beautiful, rather sullen face, dark blue eyes, and very black hair which was cut short. Her voice, when she spoke, was rich and sonorous, and completely un-English.

"I fear my uncle will be unable to see you. He is a great invalid."

"That is a pity, but perhaps you will kindly help me instead. You are Mademoiselle Daviloff, are you not?"

"Yes, I am Sonia Daviloff. What is it you want to know?"

"I am making some inquiries about that sad affair the night before last—the death of M. Gilmour Wilson. What can you tell me about it?"

The girl's eyes opened wide.

"He died of heart failure—as he was playing chess."

"The police are not so sure that it was—heart failure, mademoiselle."

The girl gave a terrified gesture.

"It was true then," she cried. "Ivan was right."

"Who is Ivan, and why do you say he was right?"

"It was Ivan who opened the door to you—and he has already said to me that in his opinion Gilmour Wilson did not die a natural death—that he was poisoned by mistake."

"By mistake."

"Yes, the poison was meant for my uncle."

She had quite forgotten her first distrust now, and was speaking eagerly.

"Why do you say that, mademoiselle. Who should wish to poison Dr. Savaronoff?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know. I am all in the dark. And my uncle, he will not trust me. It is natural, perhaps. You see, he hardly knows me. He saw me as a child, and not since till I came to live with him here in London. But this much I do know, he is in fear of something. We have many secret societies in Russia, and one day I overheard something which made me think it was of just such a society he went in fear. Tell me, monsieur"—she came a step nearer, and dropped her voice—"have you ever heard of a society called the 'Big Four'?"

Poirot jumped nearly out of his skin. His eyes positively bulged with astonishment.

"Why do you—what do you know of the Big Four, mademoiselle?"

"There is such an association, then! I

overheard a reference to them, and asked my uncle about it afterwards. Never have I seen a man so afraid. He turned all white and shaking. He was in fear of them, monsieur, in great fear, I am sure of it. And, by mistake, they killed the American, Wilson."

"The Big Four," murmured Poirot. "Always the Big Four! An astonishing coincidence, mademoiselle, your uncle is still in danger. I must save him. Now recount to me exactly the events of that fatal evening. Show me the chess-board, the table, how the two men sat—everything."

She went to the side of the room and brought out a small table. The top of it was exquisite, inlaid with squares of silver and black to represent a chess-board.

"This was sent to my uncle a few weeks ago as a present, with the request that he would use it in the next match he played. It was in the middle of the room—so."

Poirot examined the table with what seemed to me quite unnecessary attention. He was not conducting the inquiry at all as I would have done. Many of his questions seemed to me pointless, and upon really vital matters he seemed to have no questions to ask. I concluded that the unexpected mention of the Big Four had thrown him completely off his balance.

After a minute examination of the table and the exact position it had occupied, he asked to see the chessmen. Sonia Daviloff brought them to him in a box. He examined one or two of them in a perfunctory manner.

"An exquisite set," he murmured absent-mindedly.

Still not a question as to what refreshments there had been, or what people had been present.

I cleared my throat significantly.

"Don't you think, Poirot, that——"

He interrupted me peremptorily.

"Do not think, my friend. Leave all to me. Mademoiselle, is it quite impossible that I should see your uncle?"

A faint smile showed itself on her face.

"He will see you, yes. You understand, it is my part to interview all strangers first."

She disappeared. I heard a murmur of voices in the next room, and a minute later she came back and motioned us to pass into the adjoining room.

The man who lay there on a couch was an imposing figure. Tall, gaunt, with huge bushy eyebrows and white beard, and a face haggard as the result of starvation and hardships, Dr. Savaronoff was a distinct personality. I noted the peculiar formation of his head, its unusual

height. A great chess player must have a great brain, I knew. I could easily understand Dr. Savaronoff being the second greatest player in the world.

Poirot bowed.

"M. le Docteur, may I speak to you alone?"

Savaronoff turned to his niece.

"Leave us, Sonia."

She disappeared obediently.

"Now, sir, what is it?"

"Dr. Savaronoff, you have recently come into an enormous fortune. If you should—die unexpectedly, who inherits it?"

"I have made a will leaving everything to my niece, Sonia Daviloff. You do not suggest——"

"I suggest nothing, but you have not seen your niece since she was a child. It would have been easy for any one to impersonate her."

Savaronoff seemed thunderstruck by the suggestion. Poirot went on easily.

"Enough as to that. I give you the word of warning, that is all. What I want you to do now is to describe to me the game of chess the other evening."

"How do you mean—describe it?"

"Well, I do not play the chess myself, but I understand that there are various regular ways

of beginning—the gambit, do they not call it ? ”

Dr. Savaronoff smiled a little.

“ Ah ! I comprehend you now. Wilson opened Ruy Lopez—one of the soundest openings there is, and one frequently adopted in tournaments and matches.”

“ And how long had you been playing when the tragedy happened ? ”

“ It must have been about the third or fourth move when Wilson suddenly fell forward over the table, stone dead.”

Poirot rose to depart. He flung out his last question as though it was of absolutely no importance, but I knew better.

“ Had he had anything to eat or drink ? ”

“ A whisky and soda, I think.”

“ Thank you, Dr. Savaronoff. I will disturb you no longer.”

Ivan was in the hall to show us out. Poirot lingered on the threshold.

“ The flat below this, do you know who lives there ? ”

“ Sir Charles Kingwell, a member of Parliament, sir. It has been let furnished lately, though.”

“ Thank you.”

We went out into the bright winter sunlight.

"Well, really, Poirot," I burst out. "I don't think you've distinguished yourself this time. Surely your questions were very inadequate."

"You think so, Hastings?" Poirot looked at me appealingly. "I was *boulversé*, yes. What would you have asked?"

I considered the question carefully, and then outlined my scheme to Poirot. He listened with what seemed to be close interest. My monologue lasted until we had nearly reached home.

"Very excellent, very searching, Hastings," said Poirot, as he inserted his key in the door and preceded me up the stairs. "But quite unnecessary."

"Unnecessary!" I cried, amazed. "If the man was poisoned——"

"Aha," cried Poirot, pouncing upon a note which lay on the table. "From Japp. Just as I thought." He flung it over to me. It was brief and to the point. No traces of poison had been found, and there was nothing to show how the man came by his death.

"You see," said Poirot, "our questions would have been quite unnecessary."

"You guessed this beforehand?"

"'Forecast the probable result of the deal,'" quoted Poirot from a recent Bridge problem on which I had spent much time. "*Mon ami*,



when you do that successfully, you do not call it guessing."

"Don't let's split hairs," I said impatiently. "You foresaw this?"

"I did."

"Why?"

Poirot put his hand into his pocket and pulled out—a white bishop.

"Why," I cried, "you forgot to give it back to Dr. Savaronoff."

"You are in error, my friend. That bishop still reposes in my left-hand pocket. I took its fellow from the box of chessmen Mademoiselle Daviloff kindly permitted me to examine. The plural of one bishop is two bishops."

He sounded the final "s" with a great hiss. I was completely mystified.

"But why did you take it?"

"*Parbleu*, I wanted to see if they were exactly alike."

He stood them on the table side by side.

"Well, they are, of course," I said, "exactly alike."

Poirot looked at them with his head on one side.

"They seem so, I admit. But one should take no fact for granted until it is proved. Bring me, I pray you, my little scales."

With infinite care he weighed the two chessmen, then turned to me with a face alight with triumph.

"I was right. See you, I was right. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot!"

He rushed to the telephone—waited impatiently.

"Is that Japp? Ah! Japp, it is you. Hercule Poirot speaks. Watch the manservant, Ivan. On no account let him slip through your fingers. Yes, yes, it is as I say."

He dashed down the receiver and turned to me.

"You see it not, Hastings? I will explain. Wilson was not poisoned, he was electrocuted. A thin metal rod passes up the middle of one of those chessmen. The table was prepared beforehand and set upon a certain spot on the floor. When the bishop was placed upon one of the silver squares, the current passed through Wilson's body, killing him instantly. The only mark was the electric burn upon his hand—his left hand, because he was left-handed. The "special table" was an extremely cunning piece of mechanism. The table I examined was a duplicate, perfectly innocent. It was substituted for the other immediately after the murder. The thing was worked from the flat below, which,

if you remember, was let furnished. But one accomplice at least was in Savaronoff's flat. The girl is an agent of the Big Four, working to inherit Savaronoff's money."

"And Ivan?"

"I strongly suspect that Ivan is none other than the famous Number Four."

"What?"

"Yes. The man is a marvellous character actor. He can assume any part he pleases."

I thought back over past adventures, the lunatic asylum keeper, the butcher's young man, the suave doctor, all the same man, and all totally unlike each other.

"It's amazing," I said at last. "Everything fits in. Savaronoff had an inkling of the plot, and that's why he was so averse to playing the match."

Poirot looked at me without speaking. Then he turned abruptly away, and began pacing up and down.

"Have you a book on chess by any chance, *mon ami*?" he asked suddenly.

"I believe I have somewhere."

It took me some time to ferret it out, but I found it at last, and brought it to Poirot, who sank down in a chair and started reading it with the greatest attention.

In about a quarter of an hour the telephone rang. I answered it. It was Japp. Ivan had left the flat, carrying a large bundle. He had sprung into a waiting taxi, and the chase had begun. He was evidently trying to lose his pursuers. In the end he seemed to fancy that he had done so, and had then driven to a big empty house at Hampstead. The house was surrounded.

I recounted all this to Poirot. He merely stared at me as though he scarcely took in what I was saying. He held out the chess book.

"Listen to this, my friend. This is the Ruy Lopez opening. 1 P-K4, P-K4 ; 2 Kt-KB3, Kt-QB3 ; 3 B-Kt5 ; ? Then there comes a question as to Black's best third move. He has the choice of various defences. It was White's third move that killed Gilmour Wilson, 3 B-Kt5. Only the third move—does that say nothing to you ? "

I hadn't the least idea what he meant, and told him so.

"I suppose, Hastings, that while you were sitting in this chair, you heard the front door being opened and shut, what would you think ? "

"I should think some one had gone out, I suppose."

"Yes—but there are always two ways of

looking at things. Some one gone out—some one come *in*—two totally different things, Hastings. But if you assumed the wrong one, presently some little discrepancy would creep in and show you that you were on the wrong track.”

“What does all this mean, Poirot.”

Poirot sprang to his feet with sudden energy.

“It means that I have been a triple imbecile. Quick, quick, to the flat in Westminster. We may yet be in time.”

We tore off in a taxi. Poirot returned no answer to my excited questions. We raced up the stairs. Repeated rings and knocks brought no reply, but listening closely I could distinguish a hollow groan coming from within.

The hall porter proved to have a master key, and after a few difficulties he consented to use it.

Poirot went straight to the inner room. A whiff of chloroform met us. On the floor was Sonia Daviloff, gagged and bound, with a great wad of saturated cotton wool over her nose and mouth. Poirot tore it off and began to take measures to restore her. Presently a doctor arrived, and Poirot handed her over to his charge and drew aside with me. There was no sign of Dr. Savaronoff.

“What does it all mean?” I asked, bewildered.

“It means that before two equal deductions

I chose the wrong one. You heard me say that it would be easy for any one to impersonate Sonia Daviloff because her uncle had not seen her for so many years ? ”

“ Yes ? ”

“ Well, precisely the opposite held good also. It was equally easy for any one to impersonate the uncle.”

“ What ? ”

“ Savaronoff *did* die at the outbreak of the Revolution. The man who pretended to have escaped with such terrible hardships, the man so changed ‘ that his own friends could hardly recognise him,’ the man who successfully laid claim to an enormous fortune——”

“ Yes. Who was he ? ”

“ *Number Four*. No wonder he was frightened when Sonia let him know she had overheard one of his private conversations about the ‘ Big Four.’ Again he has slipped through my fingers. He guessed I should get on the right track in the end, so he sent off the honest Ivan on a tortuous wild goose chase, chloroformed the girl, and got out, having by now doubtless realised most of the securities left by Madame Gospoja.”

“ But—but who tried to kill him then ? ”

“ Nobody tried to kill *him*. Wilson was the intended victim all along.”

“ But why ? ”

“ My friend, Savaronoff was the second greatest chess player in the world. In all probability Number Four did not even know the rudiments of the game. Certainly he could not sustain the fiction of a match. He tried all he knew to avoid the contest. When that failed, Wilson’s doom was sealed. At all costs he must be prevented from discovering that the great Savaronoff did not even know how to play chess. Wilson was fond of the Ruy Lopez opening, and was certain to use it. Number Four arranged for death to come with the third move, before any complications of defence set in.”

“ But, my dear Poirot,” I persisted, “ are we dealing with a lunatic ? I quite follow your reasoning, and admit that you must be right, but to kill a man just to sustain his rôle ! Surely there were simpler ways out of the difficulty than that ? He could have said that his doctor forbade the strain of a match.”

Poirot wrinkled his forehead.

“ *Certainement*, Hastings,” he said, “ there were other ways, but none so convincing. Besides, you are assuming that to kill a man is a thing to avoid, are you not ? Number Four’s mind, it does not act that way. I put myself in his place, a thing impossible for you. I

picture his thoughts. He enjoys himself as the professor at that match. I doubt not he has visited the chess tourneys to study his part. He sits and frowns in thought ; he gives the impression that he is thinking great plans, and all the time he laughs in himself. He is aware that two moves are all that he knows—and all that he *need know*. Again, it would appeal to his mind to foresee the events and to make the man his own executioner at the exact time that suits Number Four. . . . Oh, yes, Hastings, I begin to understand our friend and his psychology.”

I shrugged.

“ Well, I suppose you’re right, but I can’t understand any one running a risk he could so easily avoid.”

“ Risk ! ” Poirot snorted. “ Where then lay the risk ? Would Japp have solved the problem ? No ; if Number Four had not made one small mistake he would have run no risk.”

“ And his mistake ? ” I asked, although I suspected the answer.

“ *Mon ami*, he overlooked the little gray cells of Hercule Poirot.”

Poirot has his virtues, but modesty is not one of them.

CHAPTER XII

THE BAITED TRAP

It was mid-January—a typical English winter day in London, damp and dirty. Poirot and I were sitting in two chairs well drawn up to the fire. I was aware of my friend looking at me with a quizzical smile, the meaning of which I could not fathom.

“A penny for your thoughts,” I said lightly.

“I was thinking, my friend, that at midsummer, when you first arrived, you told me that you proposed to be in this country for a couple of months only.”

“Did I say that?” I asked, rather awkwardly.
“I don’t remember.”

Poirot’s smile broadened.

“You did, *mon ami*. Since then, you have changed your plan, is it not so?”

“Er—yes, I have.”

“And why is that?”

“Dash it all, Poirot, you don’t think I’m going to leave you all alone when you’re up against a thing like the ‘Big Four,’ do you?”

Poirot nodded gently.

"Just as I thought. You are a staunch friend, Hastings. It is to serve me that you remain on here. And your wife—little Cinderella as you call her, what does she say?"

"I haven't gone into details, of course, but she understands. She'd be the last one to wish me to turn my back on a pal."

"Yes, yes, she, too, is a loyal friend. But it is going to be a long business, perhaps."

I nodded, rather discouraged.

"Six months already," I mused, "and where are we? You know, Poirot, I can't help thinking that we ought to—well, to do something."

"Always so energetic, Hastings! And what precisely would you have me do?"

This was somewhat of a poser, but I was not going to withdraw from my position.

"We ought to take the offensive," I urged. "What have we done all this time?"

"More than you think, my friend. After all, we have established the identity of Number Two and Number Three, and we have learnt more than a little about the ways and methods of Number Four."

I brightened up a little. As Poirot put it, things didn't sound so bad.

"Oh! Yes, Hastings, we have done a great deal. It is true that I am not in a position to

accuse either Ryland or Madame Olivier—who would believe me? You remember I thought once I had Ryland successfully cornered? Nevertheless I have made my suspicions known in certain quarters—the highest—Lord Aldington, who enlisted my help in the matter of the stolen submarine plans, is fully cognisant of all my information respecting the Big Four—and while others may doubt, he believes. Ryland and Madame Olivier, and Li Chang Yen himself may go their ways, but there is a searchlight turned on all their movements.”

“And Number Four?” I asked.

“As I said just now—I am beginning to know and understand his methods. You may smile, Hastings—but to penetrate a man’s personality, to know exactly what he will do under any given circumstances—that is the beginning of success. It is a duel between us, and whilst he is constantly giving away his mentality to me, I endeavour to let him know little or nothing of mine. He is in the light, I in the shade. I tell you, Hastings, that every day they fear me the more for my chosen inactivity.”

“They’ve let us alone, anyway,” I observed. “There have been no more attempts on your life, and no ambushes of any kind.”

“No,” said Poirot thoughtfully. “On the

whole, that rather surprises me. Especially as there are one or two fairly obvious ways of getting at us which I should have thought certain to have occurred to them. You catch my meaning, perhaps ? ”

“ An infernal machine of some kind ? ” I hazarded.

Poirot made a sharp click with his tongue expressive of impatience.

“ But no ! I appeal to your imagination, and you can suggest nothing more subtle than bombs in the fireplace. Well, well, I have need of some matches, I will promenade myself despite the weather. Pardon, my friend, but is it possible that you read *The Future of the Argentine*, *Mirror of Society*, *Cattle Breeding*, *The Clue of Crimson* and *Sport in the Rockies* at one and the same time ? ”

I laughed, and admitted that *The Clue of Crimson* was at present engaging my sole attention. Poirot shook his head sadly.

“ But replace then the others on the bookshelf ! Never, never shall I see you embrace the order and the method. Mon Dieu, what then is a bookself for ? ”

I apologised humbly, and Poirot, after replacing the offending volumes, each in its appointed place, went out and left me to uninterrupted enjoyment of my selected book.

I must admit, however, that I was half asleep when Mrs. Pearson's knock at the door aroused me.

"A telegram for you, captain."

I tore the orange envelope open without much interest.

Then I sat as though turned to stone.

It was a cable from Bronsen, my manager out at the South American ranch, and it ran as follows :—

"Mrs. Hastings disappeared yesterday, feared been kidnapped by some gang calling itself big four cable instructions have notified police but no clue as yet Bronsen."

I waved Mrs. Pearson out of the room, and sat as though stunned, reading the words over and over again. Cinderella—kidnapped! In the hands of the infamous Big Four! God, what could I do?

Poirot! I must have Poirot. He would advise me. He would checkmate them somehow. In a few minutes now, he would be back. I must wait patiently until then. But Cinderella—in the hands of the Big Four!

Another knock. Mrs. Pearson put her head in once more.

"A note for you, captain—brought by a heathen Chinaman. He's a-waiting downstairs."

I seized it from her. It was brief and to the point.

"If you ever wish to see your wife again, go with the bearer of this note immediately. Leave no message for your friend or she will suffer."

It was signed with a big 4.

What ought I to have done? What would you who read have done in my place?

I had no time to think. I saw only one thing—Cinderella in the power of those devils. I must obey—I dare not risk a hair of her head. I must go with this Chinaman and follow whither he led. It was a trap, yes, and it meant certain capture and possible death, but it was baited with the person dearest to me in the whole world, and I dared not hesitate.

What irked me most was to leave no word for Poirot. Once set him on my track, and all might yet be well? Dare I risk it? Apparently I was under no supervision, but yet I hesitated. It would have been so easy for the Chinaman to come up and assure himself that I was keeping to the letter of the command. Why didn't he? His very abstention made me more suspicious. I had seen so much of the omnipotence of the Big Four that I credited them with almost super-human powers. For all I know, even the little

bedraggled servant girl might be one of their agents.

No, I dared not risk it. But one thing I could do, leave the telegram. He would know then that Cinderella had disappeared, and who was responsible for her disappearance.

All this passed through my head in less time than it takes to tell, and I had clapped my hat on my head and was descending the stairs to where my guide waited, in a little over a minute.

The bearer of the message was a tall impassive Chinaman, neatly but rather shabbily dressed. He bowed and spoke to me. His English was perfect, but he spoke with a slight sing-song intonation.

"You Captain Hastings?"

"Yes," I said.

"You give me note, please."

I had foreseen the request, and handed him over the scrap of paper without a word. But that was not all.

"You have telegram to-day, yes? Come along just now? From South America, yes?"

I realised anew the excellence of their espionage system—or it might have been a shrewd guess. Bronsen was bound to cable me. They would wait until the cable was delivered and would strike hard upon it.

No good could come of denying what was palpably true.

"Yes," I said. "I did get a telegram."

"You fetch him, yes? Fetch him now."

I ground my teeth, but what could I do. I ran upstairs again. As I did so, I thought of confiding in Mrs. Pearson, at anyrate as far as Cinderella's disappearance went. She was on the landing, but close behind her was the little maid servant, and I hesitated. If she *was* a spy—the words of the note danced before my eyes. ". . . she will suffer. . . ." I passed into the sitting-room without speaking.

I took up the telegram and was about to pass out again when an idea struck me. Could I not leave some sign which would mean nothing to my enemies but which Poirot himself would find significant. I hurried across to the bookcase and tumbled out four books on to the floor. No fear of Poirot's not seeing them. They would outrage his eyes immediately—and coming on top of his little lecture, surely he would find them unusual. Next I put a shovelful of coal on the fire and managed to spill four knobs into the grate. I had done all I could—pray Heaven Poirot would read the sign aright.

I hurried down again. The Chinaman took the telegram from me, read it, then placed it in

his pocket and with a nod beckoned me to follow him.

It was a long weary march that he led me. Once we took a bus and once we went for some considerable way in a tram, and always our route led us steadily eastward. We went through strange districts, the existence I had never dreamed of. We were down by the docks now, I knew, and I realised that I was being taken into the heart of Chinatown.

In spite of myself I shivered. Still my guide plodded on, turning and twisting through mean streets and byways, until at last he stopped at a dilapidated house and rapped four times upon the door.

It was opened immediately by another Chinaman who stood aside to let us pass in. The clanging to of the door behind me was the knell of my last hopes. I was indeed in the hands of the enemy.

I was now handed over to the second Chinaman. He led me down some rickety stairs and into a cellar which was filled with bales and casks and which exhaled a pungent odour, as of eastern spices. I felt wrapped all round with the atmosphere of the East, tortuous, cunning, sinister——

Suddenly my guide rolled aside two of the casks, and I saw a low tunnel-like opening in the

wall. He motioned me to go ahead. The tunnel was of some length, and it was just too low for me to stand upright. At last, however, it broadened out into a passage, and a few minutes later we stood in another cellar.

My Chinaman went forward, and rapped four times on one of the walls. A whole section of the wall swung out, leaving a narrow doorway. I passed through, and to my utter astonishment found myself in a kind of Arabian Nights' palace. A low long subterranean chamber hung with rich oriental silks, brilliantly lighted and fragrant with perfumes and spices. There five or six silk covered divans, and exquisite carpets of Chinese workmanship covered the ground. At the end of the room was a curtained recess. From behind these curtains came a voice.

"You have brought our honoured guest?"

"Excellency, he is here," replied my guide.

"Let our guest enter," was the answer.

At the same moment, the curtains were drawn aside by an unseen hand, and I was facing an immense cushioned divan on which sat a tall thin Oriental dressed in wonderfully embroidered robes, and clearly, by the length of his finger nails, a great man.

"Be seated, I pray you, Captain Hastings," he said, with a wave of his hand. "You acceded

to my request to come immediately, I am glad to see."

"Who are you?" I asked. "Li Chang Yen?"

"Indeed no, I am but the humblest of the master's servants. I carry out his behests, that is all—as do other of his servants in other countries—in South America, for instance."

I advanced a step.

"Where is she? What have you done with her out there?"

"She is in a place of safety—where none will find her. As yet, she is unharmed. You observe that I say—*as yet!*"

Cold shivers ran down my spine as I confronted this smiling devil.

"What do you want?" I cried. "Money?"

"My dear Captain Hastings. We have no designs on your small savings, I can assure you. Not—pardon me—a very intelligent suggestion on your part. Your colleague would not have made it, I fancy."

"I suppose," I said heavily, "you wanted to get me into your toils. Well, you have succeeded. I have come here with my eyes open. Do what you like with me, and let her go. She knows nothing, and she can be no possible use to you. You've used her to get hold of me—you've got me all right, and that settles it."

The smiling Oriental caressed his smooth cheek, watching me obliquely out of his narrow eyes.

"You go too fast," he said purringly. "That does not quite—settle it. In fact, to 'get hold of you' as you express it, is not really our objective. But through you, we hope to get hold of your friend, M. Hercule Poirot."

"I'm afraid you won't do that," I said, with a short laugh.

"What I suggest is this," continued the other, his words running on as though he had not heard me. "You will write M. Hercule Poirot a letter, such a letter as will induce him to hasten hither and join you."

"I shall do no such thing," I said angrily.

"The consequences of refusal will be disagreeable."

"Damn your consequences."

"The alternative might be death!"

A nasty shiver ran down my spine, but I endeavoured to put a bold face upon it.

"It's no good threatening me, and bullying me. Keep your threats for Chinese cowards."

"My threats are very real ones, Captain Hastings. ask you again, will you write this letter?"

"I will not, and what's more, you daren't kill me. You'd have the police on your tracks in no time."

My interlocutor clapped his hands swiftly. Two Chinese attendants appeared as it were out of the blue, and pinioned me by both arms. Their master said something rapidly to them in Chinese, and they dragged me across the floor to a spot in one corner of the big chamber. One of them stooped, and suddenly, without the least warning, the flooring gave beneath my feet. But for the restraining hand of the other man I should have gone down the yawning gap beneath me. It was inky black, and I could hear the rushing of water.

"The river," said my questioner from his place on the divan. "Think well, Captain Hastings. If you refuse again, you go headlong to eternity, to meet your death in the dark waters below. For the last time, will you write that letter?"

I'm not braver than most men. I admit frankly that I was scared to death, and in a blue funk. That Chinese devil meant business, I was sure of that. It was good-bye to the good old world. In spite of myself, my voice wobbled a little as I answered.

"For the last time, no! To hell with your letter!"

Then involuntarily I closed my eyes and breathed a short prayer.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MOUSE WALKS IN

Nor often in a life-time does a man stand on the edge of eternity, but when I spoke those words in that East End cellar I was perfectly certain that they were my last words on earth. I braced myself for the shock of those black, rushing waters beneath, and experienced in advance the horror of that breath-choking fall.

But to my surprise a low laugh fell on my ears. I opened my eyes. Obeying a sign from the man on the divan, my two jailers brought me back to my old seat facing him.

"You are a brave man, Captain Hastings," he said. "We of the East appreciate bravery. I may say that I expected you to act as you have done. That brings us to the appointed second act of our little drama. Death for yourself you have faced—will you face death for another?"

"What do you mean?" I asked hoarsely, a horrible fear creeping over me.

"Surely you have not forgotten the lady who is in our power—the Rose of the Garden."

I stared at him in dumb agony.

"I think, Captain Hastings, that you will write that letter. See, I have a cable form here. The message I shall write on it depends on you, and means life or death for your wife."

The sweat broke out on my brow. My tormentor continued, smiling amiably, and speaking with perfect sangfroid :—

"There, captain, the pen is ready to your hand. You have only to write. If not——"

"If not?" I echoed.

"If not, that lady that you love dies—and dies slowly. My master, Li Chang Yen, amuses himself in his spare hours by devising new and ingenious methods of tortures——"

"My God!" I cried. "You fiend! Not that—you wouldn't do that——"

"Shall I recount to you some of his devices?"

Without heeding my cry of protest, his speech flowed on—evenly, serenely—till with a cry of horror I clapped my hands to my ears.

"It is enough, I see. Take up the pen and write."

"You would not dare——"

"Your speech is foolishness, and you know it. Take up the pen and write."

"If I do?"

"Your wife goes free. The cable shall be despatched immediately."

"How do I know that you will keep faith with me?"

"I swear it to you on the sacred tombs of my ancestors. Moreover, judge for yourself—why should I wish to do her harm? Her detention will have answered its purpose."

"And—and Poirot?"

"We will keep him in safe custody until we have concluded our operations. Then we will let him go."

"Will you swear that also on the tombs of your ancestors?"

"I have sworn one oath to you. That should be sufficient."

My heart sank. I was betraying my friend—to what? For a moment I hesitated—then the terrible alternative rose like a nightmare before my eyes. Cinderella—in the hands of these Chinese devils, dying by slow torture——

A groan rose to my lips. I seized the pen. Perhaps by careful wording of the letter, I could convey a warning, and Poirot would be enabled to avoid the trap. It was the only hope.

But even that hope was not to remain. The Chinaman's voice rose, suave and courteous.

"Permit me to dictate to you."

He paused, consulted a sheaf of notes that lay by his side, and then dictated as follows :—

“ Dear Poirot, I think I'm on the track of Number Four. A Chinaman came this afternoon and lured me down here with a bogus message. Luckily I saw through his little game in time, and gave him the slip. Then I turned the tables on him, and managed to do a bit of shadowing on my own account—rather neatly too, I flatter myself. I'm getting a bright young lad to carry this to you. Give him half a crown, will you? That's what I promised him if it was delivered safely. I'm watching the house, and daren't leave. I shall wait for you until six o'clock, and if you haven't come then, I'll have a try at getting into the house on my own. It's too good a chance to miss, and, of course, the boy mightn't find you. But if he does, get him to bring you down here right away. And cover up those precious moustaches of yours in case any one's watching out from the house and might recognise you.

“ Yours in haste,

“ A. H.”

Every word that I wrote plunged me deeper in despair. The thing was diabolically clever. I realised how closely every detail of our life

must be known. It was just such an epistle as I might have penned myself. The acknowledgment that the Chinaman who had called that afternoon had endeavoured to "lure me away" discounted any good I might have done by leaving my "sign" of four books. It *had* been a trap, and I had seen through it, that was what Poirot would think. The time, too, was cleverly planned. Poirot, on receiving the note, would have just time to rush off with his innocent-looking guide, and that he would do so, I knew. My determination to make my way into the house would bring him post-haste. He always displayed a ridiculous distrust of my capacities. He would be convinced that I was running into danger without being equal to the situation, and would rush down to take command of the situation.

But there was nothing to be done. I wrote as bidden. My captor took the note from me, read it, then nodded his head approvingly and handed it to one of the silent attendants who disappeared with it behind one of the silken hangings on the wall which masked a doorway.

With a smile the man opposite to me picked up a cable form and wrote. He handed it to me.

It read: "Release the white bird with all despatch."

I gave a sigh of relief.

"You will send it at once?" I urged.

He smiled, and shook his head.

"When M. Hercule Poirot is in my hands it shall be sent. Not until then."

"But you promised——"

"If this device fails, I may have need of our white bird—to persuade you to further efforts."

I grew white with anger.

"My God! If you——"

He waved a long slim yellow hand.

"Be reassured, I do not think it will fail. And the moment M. Poirot is in our hands, I will keep my oath."

"If you play me false."

"I have sworn it by my honoured Ancestors. Have no fear. Rest here awhile. My servants will see to your needs whilst I am absent."

I was left alone in this strange underground nest of luxury. The second Chinese attendant had reappeared. One of them brought food and drink and offered it to me, but I waved them aside. I was sick—sick—at heart——

And then suddenly the master reappeared, tall and stately in his silken robes. He directed operations. By his orders I was hustled back through the cellar and tunnel into the original house I had entered. There they took me into

a ground floor room. The windows were shuttered, but one could see through the cracks into the street. An old ragged man was shuffling along the opposite side of the road, and when I saw him make a sign to the window, I understood that he was one of the gang on watch.

"It is well," said my Chinese friend. "Hercule Poirot has fallen into the trap. He approaches now—and alone except for the boy who guides him. Now, Captain Hastings, you have still one more part to play. Unless you show yourself he will not enter the house. When he arrives opposite, you must go out on the step and beckon him in."

"What?" I cried, revolted.

"You play that part alone. Remember the price of failure. If Hercule Poirot suspects anything is amiss and does not enter the house, your wife dies by the Seventy lingering Deaths! Ah! Here he is."

With a beating heart, and a feeling of deathly sickness, I looked through the crack in the shutters. In the figure walking along the opposite side of the street I recognised my friend at once, though his coat collar was turned up and an immense yellow muffler hid the bottom part of his face. But there was no mistaking that walk, and the poise of that egg-shaped head.

It was Poirot, coming to my aid in all good faith, suspecting nothing amiss. By his side ran a typical London urchin, grimy of face and ragged of apparel.

Poirot paused, looking across at the house, whilst the boy spoke to him eagerly and pointed. It was the time for me to act. I went out in the hall. At a sign from the tall Chinaman, one of the servants unlatched the door.

"Remember the price of failure," said my enemy in a low voice.

I was outside on the steps. I beckoned to Poirot. He hastened across.

"Aha ! So all is well with you, my friend. I was beginning to be anxious. You managed to get inside ? Is the house empty, then ?"

"Yes," I said, in a voice I strove to make natural. "There must be a secret way out of it somewhere. Come in and let us look for it."

I stepped back across the threshold. In all innocence Poirot prepared to follow me.

And then something seemed to snap in my head. I saw only too clearly the part I was playing—the part of Judas.

"Back, Poirot !" I cried. "Back for your life. It's a trap. Never mind me. Get away at once."

Even as I spoke—or rather shouted my warning hands gripped me like a vice. One of the Chinese servants sprang past me to grab Poirot.

I saw the latter spring back, his arm raised, then suddenly a dense volume of smoke was rising round me, choking me—killing me——

I felt myself falling—suffocating—this was death——

I came to myself slowly and painfully—all my senses dazed. The first thing I saw was Poirot's face. He was sitting opposite me watching me with an anxious face. He gave a cry of joy when he saw me looking at him.

"Ah, you revive—you return to yourself. All is well ! My friend—my poor friend !"

"Where am I ?" I said painfully.

"Where ? But *chez vous* !"

I looked round me. True enough, I was in the old familiar surroundings. And in the grate were the identical four knobs of coal I had carelessly spilt there.

Poirot had followed my glance.

"But yes, that was a famous idea of yours—that and the books. See you, if they should say to me any time, 'That friend of yours, that Hastings, he has not the great brain, is it not so ?' I shall reply to them : 'You are in error.'



It was an idea magnificent and superb that occurred to you there."

"You understood their meaning then?"

"Am I an imbecile? Of course I understood. It gave me just the warning I needed, and the time to mature my plans. Somehow or other the Big Four had carried you off. With what object? Clearly not for your *beaux yeux*—equally clearly not because they feared you and wanted to get you out of the way. No, their object was plain. You would be used as a decoy to get the great Hercule Poirot into their clutches. I have long been prepared for something of the kind. I make my little preparations, and presently, sure enough, the messenger arrives—such an innocent little street urchin. Me, I swallow everything, and hasten away with him, and, very fortunately, they permit you to come out on the doorstep. That was my one fear, that I should have to dispose of them before I had reached the place where you were concealed, and that I should have to search for you—perhaps in vain—afterwards."

"Dispose of them, did you say?" I asked feebly. "Single-handed."

"Oh, there is nothing very clever about that. If one is prepared in advance all is simple—the motto of the Boy Scout, is it not? And a very

fine one. Me, I was prepared. Not so long ago, I rendered a service to a very famous chemist, who did a lot of work in connection with poison gas during the war. He devised for me a little bomb—simple and easy to carry about—one has but to throw it and poof, the smoke—and then the unconsciousness. Immediately I blow a little whistle and straightway some of Japp's clever fellows who were watching the house here long before the boy arrived, and who managed to follow us all the way to Limehouse, came flying up and took charge of the situation."

"But how was it you weren't unconscious too?"

"Another piece of luck. Our friend Number Four (who certainly composed that ingenious letter) permitted himself a little jest at my moustaches, which rendered it extremely easy for me to adjust my respirator under the guise of a yellow muffler."

"I remember," I cried eagerly, and then with the word "Remember" all the ghastly horror that I had temporarily forgotten came back to me. *Cinderella*——

I fell back with a groan.

I must have lost consciousness again for a minute or two. I awoke to find Poirot forcing some brandy between my lips.

"What is it, *mon ami*? But what is it—then? Tell me." Word by word, I got the thing told, shuddering as I did so. Poirot uttered a cry.

"My friend! My friend! But what you must have suffered! And I who knew nothing of all this! But reassure yourself! All is well!"

"You will find her, you mean? But she is in South America. And by the time we get there—long before, she will be dead—and God knows how and in what horrible way she will have died."

"No, no, you do not understand. She is safe and well. She has never been in their hands for one instant."

"But I got a cable from Bronsen?"

"No, no, you did not. You may have got a cable from South America signed Bronsen—that is a very different matter. Tell me, has it never occurred to you that an organisation of this kind, with ramifications all over the world, might easily strike at us through that little girl, Cinderella, whom you love so well?"

"No, never," I replied.

"Well, it did to me. I said nothing to you because I did not want to upset you unnecessarily—but I took measures of my own. Your wife's

letters all seem to have been written from the ranch, but in reality she has been in a place of safety devised by me for over three months."

I looked at him for a long time.

"You are sure of that?"

"*Parbleu!* I know it. They tortured you with a lie!"

I turned my head aside. Poirot put his hand on my shoulder. There was something in his voice that I had never heard there before.

"You like not that I should embrace you or display the emotion, I know well. I will be very British. I will say nothing—but nothing at all. Only this—that in this last adventure of ours, the honours are all with you, and happy is the man who has such a friend as I have!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE PEROXIDE BLOND

I WAS very disappointed with the results of Poirot's bomb attack on the premises in Chinatown. To begin with, the leader of the gang had escaped. When Japp's men rushed up in response to Poirot's whistle they found four Chinamen unconscious in the hall, but the man who had threatened me with death was not among them. I remembered afterwards that when I was forced out on to the doorstep, to decoy Poirot into the house, this man had kept well in the background. Presumably he was out of the danger zone of the gas bomb, and made good his escape by one of the many exits which we afterwards discovered.

From the four who remained in our hands we learnt nothing. The fullest investigation by the police failed to bring to light anything to connect them with the Big Four. They were ordinary low-class residents of the district, and they professed bland ignorance of the name Li Chang Yen. A Chinese gentleman had hired them for

service in the house by the waterside, and they knew nothing whatever of his private affairs.

By the next day I had, except for a slight headache, completely recovered from the effects of Poirot's gas bomb. We went down together to Chinatown and searched the house from which I had been rescued. The premises consisted of two ramshackle houses joined together by an underground passage. The ground floors and the upper stories of each were unfurnished and deserted, the broken windows covered by decaying shutters. Japp had already been prying about in the cellars, and had discovered the secret of the entrance to the subterranean chamber where I had spent such an unpleasant half-hour. Closer investigation confirmed the impression that he had made on me the night before. The silks on the walls and divan and the carpets on the floors were of exquisite workmanship. Although I know very little about Chinese art, I could appreciate that every article in the room was perfect of its kind.

With the aid of Japp and some of his men we conducted a most thorough search of the apartment. I had cherished high hopes that we would find documents of importance. A list, perhaps, of some of the more important agents of the Big Four, or cipher notes of some of their plans, but

we discovered nothing of the kind. The only papers we found in the whole place were the notes which the Chinaman had consulted whilst he was dictating the letter to Poirot. These consisted of a very complete record of each of our careers, and estimate of our characters, and suggestions about the weaknesses through which we might best be attacked.

Poirot was most childishly delighted with this discovery. Personally I could not see that it was of any value whatever, especially as whoever compiled the notes was ludicrously mistaken in some of his opinions. I pointed this out to my friend when we were back in our rooms.

"My dear Poirot," I said, "you know now what the enemy thinks of us. He appears to have a grossly exaggerated idea of your brain power, and to have absurdly underrated mine, but I do not see how we are better off for knowing this."

Poirot chuckled in rather an offensive way.

"You do not see, Hastings, no? But surely now we can prepare ourselves for some of their methods of attack now that we are warned of some of our faults. For instance, my friend, we know that you should think before you act. Again, if you meet a red-haired young woman

in trouble you should eye her—what you say—askance, is it not ? ”

Their notes had contained some absurd references to my supposed impulsiveness, and had suggested that I was susceptible to the charms of young women with hair of a certain shade. I thought Poirot's reference to be in the worst of taste, but fortunately I was able to counter him.

“ And what about you ? ” I demanded. “ Are you going to try to cure your ‘ overweening vanity ? ’ Your ‘ finicky tidiness ? ’ ”

I was quoting, and I could see that he was not pleased with my retort.

“ Oh, without doubt, Hastings, in some things they deceive themselves—*tant mieux !* They will learn in due time. Meanwhile we have learnt something, and to know is to be prepared.”

This last was a favourite axiom of his lately; so much so that I had begun to hate the sound of it.

“ We know something, Hastings,” he continued. “ Yes, we know something—and that is to the good—but we do not know nearly enough. We must know more.”

“ In what way ? ”

Poirot settled himself back in his chair, straightened a box of matches which I had thrown

carelessly down on the table, and assumed an attitude that I knew only too well. I saw that he was prepared to hold forth at some length.

“ See you, Hastings, we have to contend against four adversaries that is against four different personalities. With Number One we have never come into personal contact—we know him, as it were, only by the impress of his mind—and in passing, Hastings, I will tell you that I begin to understand that mind very well—a mind most subtle and Oriental—every scheme and plot that we have encountered have emanated from the brain of Li Chang Yen. Number Two and Number Three are so powerful, so high up, that they are for the present immune from our attacks. Nevertheless what is their safeguard is, by a perverse chance, our safeguard also. They are so much in the limelight that their movements must be carefully ordered. And so we come to the last member of the gang—we come to the man known as Number Four.”

Poirot's voice altered a little, as it always did when speaking of this particular individual.

“ Number Two and Number Three are able to succeed, to go on their way unscathed, owing to their notoriety and their assured position. Number Four succeeds for the opposite reason—he succeeds by the way of obscurity. Who is

he? Nobody knows. What does he look like? Again nobody knows. How many times have we seen him, you and I? Five times, is it not? And could either of us say truthfully that we could be sure of recognising him again?"

I was forced to shake my head, as I ran back in my mind over those five different people who, incredible as it seemed, were one and the same man. The burly lunatic asylum keeper, the man in the buttoned up overcoat in Paris, James, the footman, the quiet young medical man in the Yellow Jasmine case, and the Russian Professor. In no way did any two of these people resemble each other.

"No," I said hopelessly. "We've nothing to go by whatsoever."

Poirot smiled.

"Do not, I pray of you, give way to such enthusiastic despair. We know one or two things."

"What kind of things?" I asked sceptically.

"We know that he is a man of medium height, and of medium or fair colouring. If he were a tall man of swarthy complexion he could never have passed himself off as the fair stocky doctor. It is child's play, of course, to put on an additional inch or so for the part of James, or the Professor. In the same way he must have a short straight

nose. Additions can be built on to a nose by skilful make up, but a large nose cannot be successfully reduced at a moment's notice. Then again, he must be a fairly young man, certainly not over thirty-five. You see, we are getting somewhere. A man between thirty and thirty-five, of medium height and colouring, an adept in the art of make up, and with very few or any teeth of his own. "

" What ? "

" Surely, Hastings. As the keeper, his teeth were broken and discoloured, in Paris they were even and white, as the doctor they protruded slightly, and as Savaronoff they had unusually long canines. Nothing alters the face so completely as a different set of teeth. You see where all this is leading us ?

" Not exactly," I said cautiously.

" A man carries his profession written in his face, they say."

" He's a criminal," I cried.

" He is an adept in the art of making up."

" It's the same thing."

" Rather a sweeping statement, Hastings, and one which would hardly be appreciated by the theatrical world. Do you not see that the man is, or has been, at one time or another, an actor ? "

" An actor ? "

"But certainly. He has the whole technique at his finger-tips. Now there are two classes of actors, the one who sinks himself in his part, and the one who manages to impress his personality upon it. It is from the latter class that actor managers usually spring. They seize a part and mould it to their own personality. The former class is quite likely to spend its days doing Mr. Lloyd George at different music halls, or impersonating old men with beards in repertory plays. It is among that former class that we must look for our Number Four. He is a supreme artist in the way he sinks himself in each part he plays."

I was growing interested.

"So you fancy you may be able to trace his identity through his connection with the stage?"

"Your reasoning is always brilliant, Hastings."

"It might have been better," I said coldly, "if the idea had come to you sooner. We have wasted a lot of time."

"You are in error, *mon ami*. No more time has been wasted than was unavoidable. For some months now my agents have been engaged on the task. Joseph Aarons is one of them. You remember him? They have compiled a list

for me of men fulfilling the necessary qualifications—young men round about the age of thirty, of more or less nondescript appearance, and with a gift for playing character parts—men, moreover, who have definitely left the stage within the last three years.”

“Well?” I said, deeply interested.

“The list was, necessarily, rather a long one. For some time now, we have been engaged on the task of elimination. And finally we have boiled the whole thing down to four names. Here they are, my friend.”

He tossed me over a sheet of paper. I read its contents aloud.

“Ernest Luttrell. Son of a North Country parson. Always had a kink of some kind in his moral make-up. Was expelled from his public school. Went on the stage at the age of twenty-three. (There followed a list of parts he had played, with dates and places.) Addicted to drugs. Supposed to have gone to Australia four years ago. Cannot be traced after leaving England. Age 32, height 5 ft. 10½ in., clean-shaven, hair brown, nose straight, complexion fair, eyes gray.

“John St. Maur. Assumed name. Real name not known. Believed to be of cockney extraction. On stage since quite a child. Did

music hall impersonations. Not been heard of for three years. Age, about 33, height 5 ft. 10 in., slim build, blue eyes, fair colouring.

"Austen Lee. Assumed name. Real name Austen Foly. Good family. Always had taste for acting and distinguished himself in that way at Oxford. Brilliant war record. Acted in—— (The usual list followed. It included many Repertory plays.) An enthusiast on criminology. Had bad nervous breakdown as the result of a motor accident three and a half years ago, and has not appeared on the stage since. No clue to his present whereabouts. Age 35, height 5 ft. 9½ in., complexion fair, eyes blue, hair brown.

"Claud Darrell. Supposed to be real name. Some mystery about his origin. Played at music halls, and also in Repertory plays. Seems to have had no intimate friends. Was in China in 1919. Returned by way of America. Played a few parts in New York. Did not appear on the stage one night, and has never been heard of since. New York police say most mysterious disappearance. Age about 33, hair brown, fair complexion, gray eyes. Height 5 ft. 10½ in.

"Most interesting," I said, as I laid down the paper. "And so this is the result of the investigation of months? These four names. Which of them are you inclined to suspect?"

Poirot made an eloquent gesture.

"*Mon ami*, for the moment it is an open question. I would just point out to you that Claud Darrell has been in China and America—a fact not without significance, perhaps, but we must not allow ourselves to be unduly biased by that point. It may be a mere coincidence."

"And the next step?" I asked eagerly.

"Affairs are already in train. Every day cautiously worded advertisements will appear. Friends and relatives of one or the other will be asked to communicate with my solicitor at his office. Even to-day we might—— Aha, the telephone! Probably it is, as usual, the wrong number, and they will regret to have troubled us, but it may be—yes, it may be—that something has arisen."

I crossed the room and picked up the receiver.

"Yes, yes. M. Poirot's rooms. Yes, Captain Hastings speaking. Oh, it's you, Mr. McNeil! (McNeil and Hodgson were Poirot's solicitors.) I'll tell him. Yes, we'll come round at once."

I replaced the receiver and turned to Poirot, my eyes dancing with excitement.

"I say, Poirot, there's a woman there. Friend of Claud Darrell's. Miss Flossie Monro. McNeil wants you to come round."

"At the instant!" cried Poirot, disappearing

into his bedroom, and reappearing with a hat.

A taxi soon took us to our destination, and we were ushered into Mr. McNeil's private office. Sitting in the arm-chair facing the solicitor was a somewhat lurid looking lady no longer in her first youth. Her hair was of an impossible yellow, and was prolific in curls over each ear, her eyelids were heavily blackened, and she had by no means forgotten the rouge and the lip salve.

"Ah, here is M. Poirot!" said Mr. McNeil. "M. Poirot, this is Miss—er—Monro, who has very kindly called to give us some information.

"Ah, but that is most kind!" cried Poirot.

He came forward with great empressement, and shook the lady warmly by the hand.

"Mademoiselle blooms like a flower in this dry-as-dust old office," he added, careless of the feelings of Mr. McNeil.

This outrageous flattery was not without effect. Miss Monro blushed and simpered.

"Oh, go on now, Mr. Poirot!" she exclaimed.

"I know what you Frenchmen are like."

"Mademoiselle, we are not mute like Englishmen before beauty. Not that I am a Frenchman—I am a Belgian, you see."

"I've been to Ostend myself," said Miss Monro.

The whole affair, as Poirot would have said, was marching splendidly.

"And so you can tell us something about Mr. Claud Darrell?" continued Poirot.

"I knew Mr. Darrell very well at one time," explained the lady. "And I saw your advertisement, being out of a shop for the moment, and my time being my own, I said to myself: There, they want to know about poor old Claudie—lawyers, too—maybe it's a fortune looking for the rightful heir, I'd better go round at once."

Mr. McNeil rose.

"Well, Monsieur Poirot, shall I leave you for a little conversation with Miss Monro?"

"You are too amiable. But stay—a little idea presents itself to me. The hour of the *déjeuner* approaches. Mademoiselle will perhaps honour me by coming out to luncheon with me?"

Miss Monro's eyes glistened. It struck me that she was in exceedingly low water, and that the chance of a square meal was not to be despised.

A few minutes later saw us all in a taxi, bound for one of London's most expensive restaurants. Once arrived there, Poirot ordered a most delectable lunch, and then turned to his guest.

"And for wine, mademoiselle? What do you say to champagne?"

Miss Monro said nothing—or everything.

The meal started pleasantly. Poirot replenished the lady's glass with thoughtful assiduity, and gradually slid on to the topic nearest his heart.

"The poor Mr. Darrell. What a pity he is not with us."

"Yes, indeed," sighed Miss Monro. "Poor boy, I do wonder what's become of him."

"It is a long time since you have seen him, yes?"

"Oh, simply ages—not since the war. He was a funny boy, Claudie, very close about things, never told you a word about himself. But, of course, that all fits in if he's a missing heir. Is it a title, Mr. Poirot?"

"Alas, a mere heritage," said Poirot unblushingly. "But you see, it may be a question of identification. That is why it is necessary for us to find some one who knew him very well indeed. You knew him very well, did you not, mademoiselle?"

"I don't mind telling you, Mr. Poirot. You're a gentleman. You know how to order a lunch for a lady—which is more than some of these young whippersnappers do nowadays. Downright mean, I call it. As I was saying, you being a Frenchman won't be shocked. Ah, you Frenchmen! Naughty, naughty!" She wagged her finger

at him in an excess of archness. "Well, there it was, me and Claudie, two young things—what else could you expect? And I've still a kindly feeling for him. Though, mind you, he didn't treat me well—no, he didn't—he didn't treat me well at all. Not as a lady should be treated. They're all the same when it comes to a question of money."

"No, no, mademoiselle, do not say that," protested Poirot, filling up her glass once more. "Could you now describe this Mr. Darrell to me?"

"He wasn't anything so very much to look at," said Flossie Monro dreamily. "Neither tall nor short, you know, but quite well set up. Spruce looking. Eyes a sort of blue-gray. And more or less fair-haired, I suppose. But oh, what an artist! *I* never saw any one to touch him in the profession! He'd have made his name before now if it hadn't been for jealousy. Ah, Mr. Poirot, jealousy—you wouldn't believe it, you really wouldn't, what we artists have to suffer through jealousy. Why, I remember once at Manchester——"

We displayed what patience we could in listening to a long complicated story about a pantomime, and the infamous conduct of the principal boy. Then Poirot led her gently back to the subject of Claud Darrell.

"It is very interesting, all this that you are able to tell us, mademoiselle, about Mr. Darrell. Women are such wonderful observers—they see everything, they notice the little detail that escapes the mere man. I have seen a woman identify one man out of a dozen others—and why, do you think? She had observed that he had a trick of stroking his nose when he was agitated. Now would a man ever have thought of noticing a thing like that?"

"Did you ever!" cried Miss Monro. "I suppose we do notice things. I remember Claudie, now I come to think of it, always fiddling with his bread at table. He'd get a little piece between his fingers and then dab it round to pick up crumbs. I've seen him do it a hundred times. Why, I'd know him anywhere by that one trick of his."

"Is not that just what I say? The marvellous observation of a woman. And did you ever speak to him about this little habit of his, mademoiselle?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Poirot. You know what men are! They don't like you to notice things—especially if it should seem you were telling them off about it. I never said a word—but many's the time I smiled to myself. Bless you, he never knew he was doing it even."

Poirot nodded gently. I noticed that his own hand was shaking a little as he stretched it out to his glass.

"Then there is always handwriting as a means of establishing identity," he remarked. "Without doubt you have preserved a letter written by Mr. Darrell?"

Flossie Monro shook her head regretfully.

"He was never one for writing. Never wrote me a line in his life."

"That is a pity," said Poirot.

"I tell you what, though," said Miss Monro suddenly. "I've got a photograph if that would be any good?"

"You have a photograph?"

Poirot almost sprang from his seat with excitement.

"It's quite an old one—eight years old at least."

"*Ça ne fait rien!* No matter how old and faded! Ah, *ma foi*, but what stupendous luck! You will permit me to inspect that photograph, mademoiselle?"

"Why, of course."

"Perhaps you will even permit me to have a copy made? It would not take long."

"Certainly if you like."

Miss Monro rose.

"Well, I must run away," she declared archly. "Very glad to have met you and your friend, Mr. Poirot."

"And the photograph? When may I have it?"

"I'll look it out to night. I think I know where to lay my hand upon it. And I'll send it to you right away."

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. You are all that is of the most amiable. I hope that we shall soon be able to arrange another little lunch together."

"As soon as you like," said Miss Monro. "I'm willing."

"Let me see, I do not think that I have your address?"

With a grand air, Miss Monro drew a card from her hand-bag, and handed it to him. It was a somewhat dirty card, and the original address had been scratched out and another substituted in pencil.

Then, with a good many bows and gesticulations on Poirot's part, we bade farewell to the lady and got away.

"Do you really think this photograph so important?" I asked Poirot.

"Yes, *mon ami*. The camera does not lie. One can magnify a photograph, seize salient points that otherwise would remain unnoticed.

And then there are a thousand details—such as the structure of the ears, which no one could ever describe to you in words. Oh, yes, it is a great chance, this, which has come our way ! That is why I propose to take precautions.”

He went across to the telephone as he finished speaking, and gave a number which I knew to be that of a private detective agency which he sometimes employed. His instructions were clear and definite. Two men were to go to the address he gave, and, in general terms, were to watch over the safety of Miss Monro. They were to follow her wherever she went.”

Poirot hung up the receiver and came back to me.

“Do you really think that necessary, Poirot ?” I asked.

“It may be. There is no doubt that we are watched, you and I, and since that is so, they will soon know with whom we were lunching to-day. And it is possible that Number Four will scent danger.”

About twenty minutes later the telephone bell rang. I answered it. A curt voice spoke into the phone.

“Is that Mr. Poirot ? St. James Hospital speaking. A young woman was brought in ten minutes ago. Street accident. Miss Flossie Monro. She is asking very urgently for Mr.

Poirot. But he must come at once. She can't possibly last long."

I repeated the words to Poirot. His face went white.

"Quick, Hastings. We must go like the wind."

A taxi took us to the hospital in less than ten minutes. We asked for Miss Monroe, and were taken immediately to the Accident Ward. But a white-capped sister met us in the doorway.

Poirot read the news in her face.

"It is over, eh?"

"She died six minutes ago."

Poirot stood as though stunned.

The nurse, mistaking his emotion, began speaking gently.

"She did not suffer, and she was unconscious towards the last. She was run over by a motor, you know—and the driver of the car did not even stop. Wicked, isn't it? I hope some one took the number."

"The stars fight against us," said Poirot, in a low voice.

"You would like to see her?"

The nurse led the way, and we followed.

Poor Flossie Monroe, with her rouge and her dyed hair. She lay there very peacefully, with a little smile on her lips.

"Yes," murmured Poirot. "The stars fight against us—but is it the stars?" He lifted his head as though struck by a sudden idea. "Is it the stars, Hastings? If it is not—if it is not. . . . Oh, I swear to you, my friend, standing here by this poor woman's body, that I will have no mercy when the time comes!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

But Poirot had turned to the nurse and was eagerly demanding information. A list of the articles found in her handbag was finally obtained. Poirot gave a suppressed cry as he read it over.

"You see, Hastings, you see?"

"See what?"

"There is no mention of a latch-key. But she must have had a latch-key with her. No, she was run down in cold blood, and the first person who bent over her took the key from her bag. But we may yet be in time. He may not have been able to find at once what he sought."

Another taxi took us to the address Flossie Monroe had given us, a squalid block of Mansions in an unsavoury neighbourhood. It was some time before we could gain admission to Miss Monroe's flat, but we had at least the satisfaction of knowing that no one could leave it whilst we were on guard outside.

Eventually we got in. It was plain that some

one had been before us. The contents of drawers and cupboards were strewn all over the floor. Locks had been forced, and small tables had even been overthrown, so violent had been the searcher's haste.

Poirot began to hunt through the debris. Suddenly he stood erect with a cry, holding out something. It was an old fashioned photograph frame—empty.

He turned it slowly over. Affixed to the back was a small round label—a price label.

"It cost four shillings," I commented.

"*Mon Dieu !* Hastings, use your eyes. That is a new clean label. It was stuck there by the man who took out the photograph, the man who was here before us, but knew that we should come, and so left this for us—Claud Darrell—alias Number Four !"

CHAPTER XV

THE TERRIBLE CATASTROPHE

IT was after the tragic death of Miss Flossie Monro that I began to be aware of a change in Poirot. Up to now, his invincible confidence in himself had stood the test. But it seemed as though, at last, the long strain was beginning to tell. His manner was grave and brooding, and his nerves were on edge. In these days he was as jumpy as a cat. He avoided all discussion of the Big Four as far as possible, and seemed to throw himself into his ordinary work with almost his old ardour. Nevertheless, I knew that he was secretly active in the big matter. Extraordinary-looking Slavs were constantly calling to see him, and though he vouchsafed no explanation as to these mysterious activities, I realised that he was building some new defence or weapon of opposition with the help of these somewhat repulsive-looking foreigners. Once, purely by chance, I happened to see the entries in his pass-book—he had asked me to verify

some small item—and I noticed the paying out of a huge sum—a huge sum even for Poirot who was coining money nowadays—to some Russian with apparently every letter of the alphabet in his name.

But he gave no clue as to the line on which he proposed to operate. Only over and over again he gave utterance to one phrase. "It is the greatest mistake to underestimate your adversary. Remember that, *mon ami*." And I realised that that was the pitfall he was striving at all costs to avoid.

So matters went on until the end of March, and then one morning Poirot made a remark which startled me considerably.

"This morning, my friend, I should recommend the best suit. We go to call upon the Home Secretary."

"Indeed? That is very exciting. He has called you in to take up a case?"

"Not exactly. The interview is of my seeking. You may remember my saying that I once did him some small service? He is inclined to be foolishly enthusiastic over my capabilities in consequence, and I am about to trade on this attitude of his. As you know, the French Premier, M. Desjardeaux is over in London, and at my request the Home Secretary had arranged

for him to be present at our little conference this morning."

The Right Honourable Sydney Crowther, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Home Affairs, was a well-known and popular figure. A man of some fifty years of age, with a quizzical expression and shrewd gray eyes, he received us with that delightful bonhomie of manner which was well known to be one of his principal assets.

Standing with his back to the fireplace was a tall thin man with a pointed black beard and a sensitive face.

"M. Desjardeaux," said Crowther. "Allow me to introduce to you M. Hercule Poirot of whom you may, perhaps, already have heard."

The Frenchman bowed and shook hands.

"I have indeed heard of M. Hercule Poirot," he said pleasantly. "Who has not?"

"You are too amiable, monsieur," said Poirot, bowing, but his face flushed with pleasure.

"Any word for an old friend?" asked a quiet voice, and a man came forward from a corner by a tall bookcase.

It was our old acquaintance, Mr. Ingles.

Poirot shook him warmly by the hand.

"And now, M. Poirot," said Crowther. "We are at your service. I understood you to

say that you had a communication of the utmost importance to make to us."

"That is so, monsieur. There is in the world to-day a vast organisation—an organisation of crime. It is controlled by four individuals, who are known and spoken of as the Big Four. Number One is a Chinaman, Li Chang Yen ; Number Two is the American multi-millionaire, Abe Ryland, Number Three is a Frenchwoman ; Number Four I have every reason to believe is an obscure English actor called Claud Darrell. These four are banded together to destroy the existing social order, and to replace it with an anarchy in which they would reign as dictators."

"Incredible," muttered the Frenchman. "Ryland, mixed up with a thing of that kind ? Surely the idea is too fantastic."

"Listen, monsieur, whilst I recount to you some of the doings of this Big Four."

It was an enthralling narrative which Poirot unfolded. Familiar as I was with all the details, they thrilled me anew as I heard the bald recital of our adventures and escapes.

M. Desjardeaux looked mutely at Mr. Crowther as Poirot finished. The other answered the look.

"Yes, M. Desjardeaux, I think we must admit the existence of a "Big Four." Scotland Yard was inclined to jeer at first, but they have been

forced to admit that M. Poirot was right in many of his claims. The only question is the extent of its aims. I cannot but feel that M. Poirot—er—exaggerates a little.”

For answer Poirot set forth ten salient points. I have been asked not to give them to the public even now, and so I refrain from doing so, but they included the extraordinary disasters to submarines which occurred in a certain month, and also a series of aeroplane accidents and forced landings. According to Poirot, these were all the work of the Big Four, and bore witness to the fact that they were in possession of various scientific secrets unknown to the world at large.

This brought us straight to the question which I had been waiting for the French premier to ask.

“You say that the third member of this organisation is a Frenchwoman. Have you any idea of her name?”

“It is a well-known name, monsieur. An honoured name. Number Three is no less than the famous Madame Olivier.”

At the mention of the world-famous scientist, successor to the Curies, M. Desjardeaux positively bounded from his chair, his face purple with emotion.

"Madame Olivier ! Impossible ! Absurd ! It is an insult what you say there !"

Poirot shook his head gently, but made no answer.

Desjardeaux looked at him in stupefaction for some moments. Then his face cleared, and he glanced at the Home Secretary and tapped his forehead significantly.

"M. Poirot is a great man," he observed. "But even the great man—sometimes he has his little mania, does he not ? And seeks in high places for fancied conspiracies. It is well known. You agree with me, do you not, Mr. Crowther ?"

The Home Secretary did not answer for some minutes. Then he spoke slowly and heavily.

"Upon my soul, I don't know," he said at last. "I have always had and still have the utmost belief in M. Poirot, but—well, this takes a bit of believing."

"This Li Chang Yen, too," continued M. Desjardeaux. "Who has ever heard of him ?"

"I have," said the unexpected voice of Mr. Ingles.

The Frenchman stared at him, and he stared placidly back again, looking more like a Chinese idol than ever. "Mr. Ingles," explained the Home Secretary, "is the greatest authority we have on the interior of China."

"And you have heard of this Li Chang Yen?"

"Until M. Poirot here came to me, I imagined that I was the only man in England who had. Make no mistake, M. Desjardeaux, there is only one man in China who counts to-day—Li Chang Yen. He has, perhaps, I only say perhaps, the finest brain in the world at the present time."

M. Desjardeaux sat as though stunned. Presently, however, he rallied.

"There may be something in what you say, M. Poirot," he said coldly. "But as regards Madame Olivier, you are most certainly mistaken. She is a true daughter of France, and devoted solely to the cause of science."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders and did not answer.

There was a minute or two's pause, and then my little friend rose to his feet, with an air of dignity that sat rather oddly upon his quaint personality.

"That is all I have to say, messieurs—to warn you. I thought it likely that I should not be believed. But at least you will be on your guard. My words will sink in, and each fresh event that comes along will confirm your wavering faith. It was necessary for me to speak now—later I might not have been able to do so."

"You mean——?" asked Crowther, impressed in spite of himself by the gravity of Poirot's tone.

"I mean, monsieur, that since I have penetrated the identity of Number Four, my life is not worth an hour's purchase. He will seek to destroy me at all costs—and not for nothing is he named 'The Destroyer.' Messieurs, I salute you. To you, M. Crowther, I deliver this key, and this sealed envelope. I have got together all my notes on the case, and my ideas as to how best to meet the menace that any day may break upon the world, and have placed them in a certain safe deposit. In the event of my death, M. Crowther, I authorise you to take charge of those papers and make what use you can of them. And now, messieurs, I wish you good day."

Desjardeaux merely bowed coldly, but Crowther sprang up and held out his hand.

"You have converted me, M. Poirot. Fantastic as the whole thing seems, I believe utterly in the truth of what you have told us."

Ingles left at the same time as we did.

"I am not disappointed with the interview," said Poirot, as we walked along. "I did not expect to convince Desjardeaux, but I have at least ensured that, if I die, my knowledge does

not die with me. And I have made one or two converts. *Pas si mal!* ”

“ I’m with you, as you know,” said Ingles. “ By the way, I’m going out to China as soon as I can get off.”

“ Is that wise ? ”

“ No,” said Ingles dryly. “ But it’s necessary. One must do what one can.”

“ Ah, you are a brave man ! ” cried Poirot with emotion. “ If we were not in the street, I would embrace you.”

I fancied that Ingles looked rather relieved.

“ I don’t suppose that I shall be in any more danger in China than you are in London,” he growled.

“ That is possibly true enough,” admitted Poirot. “ I hope that they will not succeed in massacring Hastings also, that is all. That would annoy me greatly.”

I interrupted this cheerful conversation to remark that I had no intention of letting myself be massacred, and shortly afterwards Ingles parted from us.

For some time we went along in silence, which Poirot at length broke by uttering a totally unexpected remark.

“ I think—I really think—that I shall have bring my brother into this.”

"Your brother," I cried, astonished. "I never knew you had a brother?"

"You surprise me, Hastings. Do you not know that all celebrated detectives have brothers who would be even more celebrated than they are were it not for constitutional indolence?"

Poirot employs a peculiar manner sometimes which makes it wellnigh impossible to know whether he is jesting or in earnest. That manner was very evident at the moment.

"What is your brother's name?" I asked, trying to adjust myself to this new idea.

"Achille Poirot," replied Poirot gravely. "He lives near Spa in Belgium."

"What does he do?" I asked with some curiosity, putting aside a half-formed wonder as to the character and disposition of the late Madame Poirot, and her classical taste in Christian names.

"He does nothing. He is, as I tell, of a singularly indolent disposition. But his abilities are hardly less than my own—which is saying a great deal."

"Is he like you to look at?"

"Not unlike. But not nearly so handsome. And he wears no moustaches."

"Is he older than you, or younger?"

"He happens to have been born on the same day."

"A twin," I cried.

"Exactly, Hastings. You jump to the right conclusion with unfailing accuracy. But here we are at home again. Let us at once get to work on that little affair of the Duchess's necklace."

But the Duchess's necklace was doomed to wait awhile. A case of quite another description was waiting for us.

Our landlady, Mrs. Pearson, at once informed us that a hospital nurse had called and was waiting to see Poirot.

We found her sitting in the big arm-chair facing the window, a pleasant-faced woman of middle age, in a dark blue uniform. She was a little reluctant to come to the point, but Poirot soon put her at her ease, and she embarked upon her story.

"You see, M. Poirot, I've never come across anything of the kind before. I was sent for, from the Lark Sisterhood, to go down to a case in Hertfordshire. An old gentleman, it is, Mr Templeton. Quite a pleasant house, and quite pleasant people. The wife, Mrs. Templeton, is much younger than her husband, and he has a son by his first marriage who lives there. I

don't know that the young man and the step-mother always get on together. He's not quite what you'd call normal—not 'wanting' exactly, but decidedly dull in the intellect. Well, this illness of Mr. Templeton's seemed to me from the first to be very mysterious. At times there seemed really nothing the matter with him, and then he suddenly has one of these gastric attacks with pain and vomiting. But the doctor seemed quite satisfied, and it wasn't for me to say anything. But I couldn't help thinking about it. And then——"

She paused, and became rather red.

"Something happened which aroused your suspicions?" suggested Poirot.

"Yes."

But she still seemed to find it difficult to go on.

"I found the servants were passing remarks too."

"About Mr. Templeton's illness?"

"Oh, no! About — about this other thing——"

"Mrs. Templeton?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Templeton and the doctor, perhaps?"

Poirot had an uncanny flair in these things. The nurse threw him a grateful glance and went on.

"They *were* passing remarks. And then one day I happened to see them together myself—in the garden——"

It was left at that. Our client was in such an agony of outraged propriety that no one could feel it necessary to ask exactly what she had seen in the garden. She had evidently seen quite enough to make up her own mind on the situation.

"The attacks got worse and worse. Dr. Treves said it was all perfectly natural and to be expected, and that Mr. Templeton could not possibly live long, but I've never seen anything like it before myself—not in all my long experience of nursing. It seemed to me much more like some form of——"

She paused, hesitating.

"Arsenical poisoning?" said Poirot helpfully.

She nodded.

"And then, too, he, the patient, I mean, said something queer. 'They'll do for me, the four of them. They'll do for me yet.'"

"Eh?" said Poirot quickly.

"Those were his very words, M. Poirot. He was in great pain at the time, of course, and hardly knew what he was saying."

"'They'll do for me, the four of them,'"

repeated Poirot thoughtfully. "What did he mean by 'the four of them,' do you think?"

"That I can't say, M. Poirot. I thought perhaps he meant his wife and son, and the doctor, and perhaps Miss Clark, Mrs. Templeton's companion. That would make four, wouldn't it? He might think they were all in league against him."

"Quite so, quite so," said Poirot, in a pre-occupied voice. "What about food? Could you take no precautions about that?"

"I'm always doing what I can. But, of course, sometimes Mrs. Templeton insists on bringing him his food herself, and then there are the times when I am off duty."

"Exactly. And you are not sure enough of your ground to go to the police?"

The nurse's face showed her horror at the mere idea.

"What I have done, M. Poirot, is this. Mr. Templeton had a very bad attack after partaking of a bowl of soup. I took a little from the bottom of the bowl afterwards, and have brought it up with me. I have been spared for the day to visit a sick mother, as Mr. Templeton was well enough to be left."

She drew out a little bottle of dark fluid and handed it to Poirot.

"Excellent, mademoiselle. We will have this analysed immediately. If you will return here in, say, an hour's time I think that we shall be able to dispose of your suspicions one way or another."

First extracting from our visitor her name and qualifications, he ushered her out. Then he wrote a note and sent it off together with the bottle of soup. Whilst we waited to hear the result, Poirot amused himself by verifying the nurse's credentials, somewhat to my surprise.

"No, no, my friend," he declared. "I do well to be careful. Do not forget the Big Four are on our track."

However, he soon elicited the information that a nurse of the name of Mabel Palmer was a member of the Lark Institute and had been sent to the case in question.

"So far, so good," he said, with a twinkle. "And now here comes Nurse Palmer back again, and here also is our analyst's report."

Both the nurse and I waited anxiously whilst Poirot read the analyst's report.

"Is there arsenic in it?" she asked breathlessly.

Poirot shook his head, refolding the paper.

"No."

We were both immeasurably surprised.

"There is no arsenic in it," continued Poirot. "But there is antimony. And that being the case, we will start immediately for Hertfordshire. Pray Heaven that we are not too late."

It was decided that the simplest plan was for Poirot to represent himself truly as a detective, but that the ostensible reason of his visit should be to question Mrs. Templeton about a servant formerly in her employment whose name he obtained from Nurse Palmer, and whom he could represent as being concerned in a jewel robbery.

It was late when we arrived at Elmstead, as the house was called. We had allowed Nurse Palmer to precede us by about twenty minutes, so that there should be no question of our all arriving together.

Mrs. Templeton, a tall dark woman, with sinuous movements and uneasy eyes, received us. I noticed that as Poirot announced his profession, she drew in her breath with a sudden hiss, as though badly startled, but she answered his question about the maid-servant readily enough. And then, to test her, Poirot embarked upon a long history of a poisoning case in which a guilty wife had figured. His eyes never left her face as he talked, and try as she would, she could hardly conceal her rising agitation. Suddenly,

with an incoherent word of excuse, she hurried from the room.

We were not long left alone. A squarely-built man with a small red moustache and pince-nez came in.

"Dr. Treves," he introduced himself. "Mrs. Templeton asked me to make her excuses to you. She's in a very bad state, you know. Nervous strain. Worry over her husband and all that. I've prescribed bed and bromide. But she hopes you'll stay and take pot luck, and I'm to do host. We've heard of you down here, M. Poirot, and we mean to make the most of you. Ah, here's Micky!"

A shambling young man entered the room. He had a very round face, and foolish-looking eyebrows raised as though in perpetual surprise. He grinned awkwardly as he shook hands. This was clearly the "wanting" son.

Presently we all went in to dinner. Dr. Treves left the room—to open some wine, I think—and suddenly the boy's physiognomy underwent a startling change. He lent forward, staring at Poirot.

"You've come about father," he said, nodding his head. "*I* know. I know lots of things—but nobody thinks I do. Mother will be glad when father's dead and she can marry Dr.

Treves. She isn't my own mother, you know. I don't like her. She wants father to die."

It was all rather horrible. Luckily, before Poirot had time to reply, the doctor came back, and we had to carry on a forced conversation.

And then suddenly Poirot lay back in his chair with a hollow groan. His face was contorted with pain.

"My dear sir, what's the matter?" cried the doctor.

"A sudden spasm. I am used to them. No, no, I require no assistance from you, doctor. If I might lie down upstairs."

His request was instantly acceded to, and I accompanied him upstairs, where he collapsed on the bed, groaning heavily.

For the first minute or two I had been taken in, but I had quickly realised that Poirot was—as he would have put it—playing the comedy, and that his object was to be left alone upstairs near the patient's room.

Hence I was quite prepared when, the instant we were alone, he sprang up.

"Quick, Hastings, the window. There is ivy outside. We can climb down before they begin to suspect."

"Climb down?"

"Yes, we must get out of this house at once. You saw him at dinner?"

"The doctor?"

"No, young Templeton. His trick with his bread. Do you remember what Flossie Monro told us before she died? That Claud Darrell had a habit of dabbing his bread on the table to pick up crumbs. Hastings, this is a vast plot, and that vacant-looking young man is our arch enemy—Number Four! Hurry."

I did not wait to argue. Incredible as the whole thing seemed, it was wiser not to delay. We scrambled down the ivy as quietly as we could and made a bee-line for the small town and the railway station. We were just able to catch the last train, the 8.34 which would land us in town about eleven o'clock.

"A plot," said Poirot thoughtfully. "How many of them were in it, I wonder? I suspect that the whole Templeton family are just so many agents of the Big Four. Did they simply want to decoy us down there? Or was it more subtle than that. Did they intend to play the comedy down there and keep me interested until they had had time to do—what? I wonder now."

He remained very thoughtful.

Arrived at our lodgings, he restrained me at the door of the sitting-room.

"Attention, Hastings. I have my suspicions. Let me enter first."

He did so, and, to my slight amusement, took the precaution to press on the electric switch with an old galosh. Then he went round the room like a strange cat, cautiously, delicately, on the alert for danger. I watched him for some time, remaining obediently where I had been put by the wall.

"It's all right, Poirot," I said impatiently.

"It seems so, *mon ami*, it seems so. But let us make sure."

"Rot," I said. "I shall light the fire, anyway, and have a pipe. I've caught you out for once. You had the matches last and you didn't put them back in the holder as usual—the very thing you're always cursing me for doing."

I stretched out my hand. I heard Poirot's warning cry—saw him leaping towards me—my hand touched the match-box.

Then—a flash of blue flame—an ear-rending crash—and darkness——

.

I came to myself to find the familiar face of our old friend Dr. Ridgeway bending over me. An expression of relief passed over his features.

"Keep still," he said soothingly. "You're all right. There's been an accident, you know."

“ Poirot ? ” I murmured.

“ You’re in my digs. Everything’s quite all right.”

A cold fear clutched at my heart. His evasion woke a horrible fear.

“ Poirot ? ” I reiterated. “ What of Poirot.”

He saw that I had to know and that further evasions were useless.

“ By a miracle you escaped—Poirot—did not ! ”

A cry burst from my lips.

“ Not dead ? Not dead ? ”

Ridgeway bowed his head, his features working with emotion.

With desperate energy I pulled myself to a sitting position.

“ Poirot may be dead,” I said weakly. “ But his spirit lives on. I will carry on his work ! Death to the Big Four ! ”

Then I fell back, fainting.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DYING CHINAMAN

EVEN now I can hardly bear to write of those days in March.

Poirot—the unique, the inimitable Hercule Poirot—dead ! There was a particularly diabolical touch in the disarranged match-box, which was certain to catch his eye, and which he would hasten to rearrange—and thereby touch off the explosion. That, as a matter of fact, it was I who actually precipitated the catastrophe never ceased to fill me with unavailing remorse. It was, as Doctor Ridgeway said, a perfect miracle that I had not been killed, but had escaped with a slight concussion.

Although it had seemed to me as though I regained consciousness almost immediately, it was in reality over twenty-four hours before I came back to life. It was not until the evening of the day following that I was able to stagger feebly into an adjoining room, and view with deep emotion the plain elm coffin which held

the remains of one of the most marvellous men this world has ever known.

From the very first moment of regaining consciousness I had had only one purpose in mind—to avenge Poirot's death, and to hunt down the Big Four remorselessly.

I had thought that Ridgeway would have been of one mind with me about this, but to my surprise the good doctor seemed unaccountably lukewarm.

"Get back to South America" was his advice, tendered on every occasion. Why attempt the impossible? Put as delicately as possible, his opinion amounted to this:—If Poirot, the unique Poirot, had failed, was it likely that I should succeed?

But I was obstinate. Putting aside any question as to whether I had the necessary qualifications for the task (and I may say in passing that I did not entirely agree with his views on this point.) I had worked so long with Poirot that I knew his methods by heart, and felt fully capable of taking up the work where he had laid it down; it was, with me, a question of feeling. My friend had been foully murdered. Was I to go tamely back to South America without an effort to bring his murderers to justice?

I said all this and more to Ridgeway, who listened attentively enough.

"All the same," he said when I had finished, "my advice does not vary. I am earnestly convinced that Poirot himself, if he were here, would urge you to return. In his name, I beg of you, Hastings, abandon these wild ideas and go back to your ranch."

To that only one answer was possible, and, shaking his head sadly, he said no more.

It was a month before I was fully restored to health. Towards the end of April, I sought, and obtained, an interview with the Home Secretary.

Mr. Crowther's manner was reminiscent of that of Dr. Ridgeway. It was soothing and negative. Whilst appreciating the offer of my services, he gently and considerately declined them. The papers referred to by Poirot had passed into his keeping, and he assured me that all possible steps were being taken to deal with the approaching menace.

With that cold comfort I was forced to be satisfied. Mr. Crowther ended the interview by urging me to return to South America. I found the whole thing profoundly unsatisfactory.

I should, I suppose, in its proper place, have described Poirot's funeral. It was a solemn and moving ceremony, and the extraordinary number of floral tributes passed belief. They

came from high and low alike, and bore striking testimony to the place my friend had made for himself in the country of his adoption. For myself, I was frankly overcome by emotion as I stood by the grave side and thought of all our varied experiences and the happy days we had passed together.

By the beginning of May I had mapped out a plan of campaign. I felt that I could not do better than keep to Poirot's scheme of advertising for any information respecting Claud Darrell. I had an advertisement to this effect inserted in a number of morning newspapers, and I was sitting in a small restaurant in Soho, and judging of the effect of the advertisement, when a small paragraph in another part of the paper gave me a nasty shock.

Very briefly, it reported the mysterious disappearance of Mr. John Ingles from the S.S. *Shanghai*, shortly after the latter had left Marseilles. Although the weather was perfectly smooth, it was feared that the unfortunate gentleman must have fallen overboard. The paragraph ended with a brief reference to Mr. Ingles's long and distinguished service in China.

The news was unpleasant. I read into Ingles's death a sinister motive. Not for one moment did I believe the theory of an accident. Ingles

had been murdered, and his death was only too clearly the handiwork of that accursed Big Four.

As I sat there, stunned by the blow, and turning the whole matter over in my mind, I was startled by the remarkable behaviour of the man sitting opposite me. So far I had not paid much attention to him. He was a thin, dark man of middle age, sallow of complexion, with a small pointed beard. He had sat down opposite me so quietly that I had hardly noticed his arrival.

But his actions now were decidedly peculiar, to say the least of them. Leaning forward, he deliberately helped me to salt, putting it in four little heaps round the edge of my plate.

"You will excuse me," he said, in a melancholy voice. "To help a stranger to salt is to help them to sorrow, they say. That may be an unavoidable necessity. I hope not, though. I hope that you will be reasonable."

Then, with a certain significance, he repeated his operations with the salt on his own plate. The symbol 4 was too plain to be missed. I looked at him searchingly. In no way that I could see did he resemble young Templeton, or James the footman, or any other of the various personalities we had come across. Nevertheless, I was convinced that I had to do with no less

than the redoubtable Number Four himself. In his voice there was certainly a faint resemblance to the buttoned-up stranger who had called upon us in Paris.

I looked round, undecided as to my course of action. Reading my thoughts, he smiled and gently shook his head.

"I should not advise it," he remarked. "Remember what came of your hasty action in Paris. Let me assure you that my way of retreat is well assured. Your ideas are inclined to be a little crude, Captain Hastings, if I may say so."

"You devil," I said, choking with rage, "you incarnate devil!"

"Heated—just a trifle heated. Your late lamented friend would have told you that a man who keeps calm has always a great advantage."

"You dare to speak of him," I cried. "The man you murdered so foully. And you come here——"

He interrupted me.

"I came here for an excellent and peaceful purpose. To advise you to return at once to South America. If you do so, that is the end of the matter as far as the Big Four are concerned. You and yours will not be molested in any way. I give you my word as to that."

I laughed scornfully.

"And if I refuse to obey your autocratic command?"

"It is hardly a command. Shall we say that it is—a warning?"

There was a cold menace in his tone.

"The first warning," he said softly. "You will be well advised not to disregard it."

Then, before I had any hint of his intention, he rose and slipped quickly away towards the door. I sprang to my feet and was after him in a second, but by bad luck I cannoned straight into an enormously fat man who blocked the way between me and the next table. By the time I had disentangled myself, my quarry was just passing through the doorway, and the next delay was from a waiter carrying a huge pile of plates who crashed into me without the least warning. By the time I got to the door there was no sign of the thin man with the dark beard.

The waiter was fulsome in apologies, the fat man was sitting placidly at a table ordering his lunch. There was nothing to show that both occurrences had not been a pure accident. Nevertheless, I had my own opinion as to that. I knew well enough that the agents of the Big Four were everywhere.

Needless to say, I paid no heed to the warning given me. I would do or die in the good cause.

I received in all only two answers to the advertisements. Neither of them gave me any information of value. They were both from actors who had played with Claud Darrell at one time or another. Neither of them knew him at all intimately, and no new light was thrown upon the problem of his identity and present whereabouts.

No further sign came from the Big Four until about ten days later. I was crossing Hyde Park, lost in thought, when a voice, rich with a persuasive foreign inflection, hailed me.

“Captain Hastings, is it not?”

A big limousine had just drawn up by the pavement. A woman was leaning out. Exquisitely dressed in black, with wonderful pearls, I recognised the lady first known to us as Countess Vera Rossakoff, and afterwards under a different alias as an agent of the Big Four. Poirot, for some reason or other, had always had a sneaking fondness for the countess. Something in her very flamboyance attracted the little man. She was, he was wont to declare in moments of enthusiasm, a woman in a thousand. That she was arrayed against us, on the side of our bitterest enemies, never seemed to weigh in his judgment.

“Ah, do not pass on!” said the countess. “I have something most important to say to

you. And do not try to have me arrested either, for that would be stupid. You were always a little stupid—yes, yes, it is so. You are stupid now, when you persist in disregarding the warning we sent you. It is the second warning I bring you. Leave England at once. You can do no good here—I tell you that frankly. You will never accomplish anything.”

“In that case,” I said stiffly, “it seems rather extraordinary that you are all so anxious to get me out of the country.”

The countess shrugged her shoulders—magnificent shoulders, and a magnificent gesture.

“For my part, I think that, too, stupid. I would leave you here to play about happily. But the chiefs, you see, are fearful that some word of yours may give great help to those more intelligent than yourself. Hence—you are to be banished.”

The countess appeared to have a flattering idea of my abilities. I concealed my annoyance. Doubtless this attitude of hers was assumed expressly to annoy me and to give me the idea that I was unimportant.

“It would, of course, be quite easy to—remove you,” she continued, “but I am quite sentimental sometimes. I pleaded for you. You have a

nice little wife somewhere, have you not ? And it would please the poor little man who is dead to know that you were not to be killed. I always liked him, you know. He was clever—but clever ! Had it not been a case of four against one I honestly believe he might have been too much for us. I confess it frankly—he was my master ! I sent a wreath to the funeral as a token of my admiration—an enormous one of crimson roses. Crimson roses express my temperament.”

I listened in silence and a growing distaste.

“ You have the look of a mule when it puts its ears back and kicks. Well, I have delivered my warning. Remember this, the third warning will come by the hand of the Destroyer——”

She made a sign, and the car whirled away rapidly. I noted the number mechanically, but without the hope that it would lead to anything. The Big Four were not apt to be careless in details.

I went home a little sobered. One fact had emerged from the countess’s flood of volubility. I was in real danger of my life. Though I had no intention of abandoning the struggle, I saw that it behoved me to walk warily and adopt every possible precaution.

Whilst I was reviewing all these facts and

seeking for the best line of action, the telephone bell rang. I crossed the room and picked up the receiver.

"Yes. Hallo. Who's speaking?"

A crisp voice answered me.

"This is St. Giles' Hospital. We have a Chinaman here, knifed in the street and brought in. He can't last long. We rang you up because we found in his pocket a piece of paper with your name and address on it."

I was very much astonished. Nevertheless, after a moment's reflection I said that I would come down at once. St. Giles' Hospital was, I knew, down by the docks, and it occurred to me that the Chinaman might have just come off some ship.

It was on my way down there that a sudden suspicion shot into my mind. Was the whole thing a trap? Wherever a Chinaman was, there might be the hand of Li Chang Yen. I remembered the adventure of the Baited Trap. Was the whole thing a ruse on the part of my enemies?

A little reflection convinced me that at any rate a visit to the hospital would do no harm. It was probable that the thing was not so much a plot as what is vulgarly known as a "plant." The dying Chinaman would make some revelation to me upon which I should act, and which would

have the result of leading me into the hands of the Big Four. The thing to do was to preserve an open mind, and whilst feigning credulity be secretly on my guard.

On arriving at St. Giles' Hospital, and making my business known, I was taken at once to the accident ward, to the bedside of the man in question. He lay absolutely still, his eyelids closed, and only a very faint movement of the chest showed that he still breathed. A doctor stood by the bed, his fingers on the Chinaman's pulse.

"He's almost gone," he whispered to me.
 "You know him, eh?"

I shook my head.

"I've never seen him before."

"Then what was he doing with your name and address in his pocket? You are Captain Hastings, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I can't explain it any more than you can."

"Curious thing. From his papers he seems to have been the servant of a man called Ingles—a retired Civil Servant. Ah, you know him, do you?" he added quickly, as I started at the name.

Ingles's servant! Then I *had* seen him before. Not that I had ever succeeded in being able to

distinguish one Chinaman from another. He must have been with Ingles on his way to China, and after the catastrophe he had returned to England with a message, possibly, for me. It was vital, imperative that I should hear that message.

"Is he conscious?" I asked. "Can he speak? Mr. Ingles was an old friend of mine, and I think it possible that this poor fellow has brought me a message from him. Mr. Ingles is believed to have gone overboard about ten days ago."

"He's just conscious, but I doubt if he has the force to speak. He lost a terrible lot of blood, you know. I can administer a stimulant, of course, but we've already done all that is possible in that direction."

Nevertheless, he administered a hypodermic injection, and I stayed by the bed, hoping against hope for a word—a sign—that might be of the utmost value to me in my work. But the minutes sped on and no sign came.

And suddenly a baleful idea shot across my mind? Was I not already falling into the trap? Suppose that this Chinaman had merely assumed the part of Ingles's servant, that he was in reality an agent of the Big Four? Had I not once read that certain Chinese priests were capable of simulating death? Or, to go further

still, Li Chang Yen might command a little band of fanatics who would welcome death itself if it came at the command of their master. I must be on my guard.

Even as these thoughts flashed across my mind, the man in the bed stirred. His eyes opened. He murmured something incoherently. Then I saw his glance fasten upon me. He made no sign of recognition, but I was at once aware that he was trying to speak to me. Be he friend or foe, I must hear what he had to say.

I leaned over the bed, but the broken sounds conveyed no sort of meaning to me. I thought I caught the word "hand," but in what connection it was used I could not tell. Then it came again, and this time I heard another word, the word "Largo." I stared in amazement, as the possible juxtaposition of the two suggested itself to me.

"Handel's Largo?" I queried.

The Chinaman's eyelids flickered rapidly, as though in assent, and he added another Italian word, the word "*carrozza*." Two or three more words of murmured Italian came to my ears, and then he fell back abruptly.

The doctor pushed me aside. It was all over. The man was dead.

I went out into the air again thoroughly bewildered.

"Handel's Largo," and a "*carrozza*." If I remembered rightly, a *carrozza* was a carriage. What possible meaning could lie behind those simple words. The man was a Chinaman, not an Italian, why should he speak in Italian? Surely, if he were indeed Ingles's servant, he must know English? The whole thing was profoundly mystifying. I puzzled over it all the way home. Oh, if only Poirot had been there to solve the problem with his lightning ingenuity!

I let myself in with my latch-key and went slowly up to my room. A letter was lying on the table, and I tore it open carelessly enough. But in a minute I stood rooted to the ground whilst I read.

It was a communication from a firm of solicitors.

"DEAR SIR (it ran),—As instructed by our late client, M. Hercule Poirot, we forward you the enclosed letter. This letter was placed in our hands a week before his death, with instructions that in the event of his demise, it should be sent to you at a certain date after his death.

"Yours faithfully, etc."

I turned the enclosed missive over and over. It was undoubtedly from Poirot. I knew that familiar writing only too well. With a heavy heart, yet a certain eagerness, I tore it open.

“MON CHER AMI (it began),—When you receive this I shall be no more. Do not shed tears about me, but follow my orders. Immediately upon receipt of this, return to South America. Do not be pig-headed about this. It is not for sentimental reasons that I bid you undertake the journey. *It is necessary.* It is part of the plan of Hercule Poirot! To say more is unnecessary, to any one who has the acute intelligence of my friend Hastings.

“*A bas* the Big Four! I salute you, my friend, from beyond the grave.

“Ever thine,
“HERCULE POIROT.”

I read and re-read this astonishing communication. One thing was evident. This amazing man had so provided for every eventuality that even his own death did not upset the sequence of his plans! Mine was to be the active part—his the directing genius. Doubtless I should find full instructions awaiting me beyond the seas. In the meantime my enemies, convinced

that I was obeying their warning, would cease to trouble their heads about me. I could return, unsuspected, and work havoc in their midst.

There was now nothing to hinder my immediate departure. I sent off cables, booked my passage, and one week later found me embarking in the *Ansonia* en route for Buenos Ayres.

Just as the boat left the quay, a steward brought me a note. It had been given him, so he explained, by a big gentleman in a fur coat who had left the boat last thing before the gangway planks were lifted.

I opened it. It was terse and to the point.

"You are wise," it ran. It was signed with a big figure 4.

I could afford to smile to myself !

The sea was not too choppy. I enjoyed a passable dinner, made up my mind as to the majority of my fellow passengers, and had a rubber or two of Bridge. Then I turned in and slept like a log as I always do on board ship.

I was awakened by feeling myself persistently shaken. Dazed and bewildered, I saw that one of the ship's officers was standing over me. He gave a sigh of relief as I sat up.

"Thank the Lord I've got you awake at last. I've had no end of a job. Do you always sleep like that ?"

"What's the matter?" I asked, still bewildered and not fully awake. "Is there anything wrong with the ship?"

"I expect you know what's the matter better than I do," he replied dryly. "Special instructions from the Admiralty. There's a destroyer waiting to take you off."

"What?" I cried. "In mid-ocean?"

"It seems a most mysterious affair, but that's not my business. They've sent a young fellow aboard who is to take your place, and we are all sworn to secrecy. Will you get up and dress?"

Utterly unable to conceal my amazement I did as I was told. A boat was lowered, and I was conveyed aboard the destroyer. There I was received courteously, but got no further information. The commander's instructions were to land me at a certain spot on the Belgian coast. There his knowledge and responsibility ended.

The whole thing was like a dream. The one idea I held to firmly was that all this must be part of Poirot's plan. I must simply go forward blindly, trusting in my dead friend.

I was duly landed at the spot indicated. There a motor was waiting, and soon I was rapidly whirling along across the flat Flemish plains. I slept that night at a small hotel in Brussels. The

next day we went on again. The country became wooded and hilly. I realised that we were penetrating into the Ardennes, and I suddenly remembered Poirot's saying that he had a brother who lived at Spa.

But we did not go to Spa itself. We left the main road and wound into the leafy fastnesses of the hills, till we reached a little hamlet, and an isolated white villa high on the hill-side. Here the car stopped in front of the green door of the villa.

The door opened as I alighted. An elderly manservant stood in the doorway bowing.

"M. le Capitaine Hastings?" he said in French. "Monsieur le Capitaine is expected. If he will follow me."

He led the way across the hall, and flung open a door at the back, standing aside to let me pass in.

I blinked a little, for the room faced west and the afternoon sun was pouring in. Then my vision cleared and I saw a figure waiting to welcome me with outstretched hands.

It was—oh, impossible, it couldn't be—but yes!

"Poirot!" I cried, and for once did not attempt to evade the embrace with which he overwhelmed me.

"But yes, but yes, it is indeed I ! Not so easy to kill Hercule Poirot !"

"But Poirot—*why* ?"

"A *ruse de guerre*, my friend, a *ruse de guerre*. All is now ready for our grand coup."

"But you might have told *me* !"

"No, Hastings, I could not. Never, never, in a thousand years, could you have acted the part at the funeral. As it was, it was perfect. It could not fail to carry conviction to the Big Four."

"But what I've been through——"

"Do not think me too unfeeling. I carried out the deception partly for your sake. I was willing to risk my own life, but I had qualms about continually risking yours. So, after the explosion, I have an idea of great brilliancy. The good Ridgeway, he enables me to carry it out. I am dead, you will return to South America. But, *mon ami*, that is just what you would not do. In the end I have to arrange a solicitor's letter, and a long rigmarole. But, at all events, here you are—that is the great thing. And now we lie here—*perdu*—till the moment comes for the last grand coup—the final overthrowing of the Big Four."

CHAPTER XVII

NUMBER FOUR WINS A TRICK

FROM our quiet retreat in the Ardennes we watched the progress of affairs in the great world. We were plentifully supplied with newspapers, and every day Poirot received a bulky envelope, evidently containing some kind of report. He never showed these reports to me, but I could usually tell from his manner whether its contents had been satisfactory or otherwise. He never wavered in his belief that our present plan was the only one likely to be crowned by success.

“As a minor point, Hastings,” he remarked one day, “I was in continual fear of your death lying at my door. And that rendered me nervous—like a cat upon the jumps, as you say. But now I am well satisfied. Even if they discover that the Captain Hastings who landed in South America is an imposter (and I do not think they will discover it, they are not likely to send an agent out there who knows you personally), they will only believe that you are trying to circumvent

them in some clever manner of your own, and will pay no serious attention to discovering your whereabouts. Of the one vital fact, my supposed death, they are thoroughly convinced. They will go ahead and mature their plans."

"And then?" I asked eagerly.

"And then, *mon ami*, grand resurrection of Hercule Poirot! At the eleventh hour I reappear, throw all into confusion, and achieve the supreme victory in my own unique manner!"

I realised that Poirot's vanity was of the case-hardened variety which could withstand all attacks. I reminded him that once or twice the honours of the game had lain with our adversaries. But I might have known that it was impossible to diminish Hercule Poirot's enthusiasm for his own methods.

"See you, Hastings, it is like the little trick that you play with the cards. You have seen it without doubt? You take the four knaves, you divide them, one on top of the pack, one underneath, and so on—you cut and you shuffle, and there they are all together again. That is my object. So far I have been contending, now against one of the Big Four, now against another. But let me get them all together, like the four knaves in the pack of cards, and then, with one coup, I destroy them all!"

"And how do you propose to get them all together?" I asked.

"By awaiting the supreme moment. By lying *perdu* until they are ready to strike."

"That may mean a long wait," I grumbled.

"Always impatient, the good Hastings! But no, it will not be so long. The one man they were afraid of—myself—is out of the way. I give them two or three months at most."

His speaking of some one being got out of the way reminded me of Ingles and his tragic death, and I remembered that I had never told Poirot about the dying Chinaman in St. Giles' Hospital.

He listened with keen attention to my story.

"Ingles's servant, eh? And the few words he uttered were in Italian? Curious."

"That's why I suspected it might have been a plant on the part of the Big Four."

"Your reasoning is at fault, Hastings. Employ the little gray cells. If your enemies wished to deceive you they would assuredly have seen to it that the Chinaman spoke in intelligible pigeon English. No, the message was genuine. Tell me again all that you heard?"

"First of all he made a reference to Handel's Largo, and then he said something that sounded like '*carrozzo*'—that's a carriage, isn't it?"

"Nothing else?"

"Well, just at the end he murmured something like 'Cara' somebody or other—some woman's name. Zia, I think. But I don't suppose that that had any bearing on the rest of it."

"You would not suppose so, Hastings. Cara Zia is very important, very important indeed."

"I don't see——"

"My dear friend, you *never* see—and anyway the English know no geography."

"Geography?" I cried. "What has geography got to do with it?"

"I dare say M. Thomas Cook would be more to the point."

As usual, Poirot refused to say anything more—a most irritating trick of his. But I noticed that his manner became extremely cheerful, as though he had scored some point or other.

The days went on, pleasant if a trifle monotonous. There were plenty of books in the villa, and delightful rambles all around, but I chafed sometimes at the forced inactivity of our life, and marvelled at Poirot's state of placid content. Nothing occurred to ruffle our quiet existence, and it was not until the end of June, well within the limit that Poirot had given them, that we had our news of the Big Four.

A car drove up to the villa early one morning,

such an unusual event in our peaceful life that I hurried down to satisfy my curiosity. I found Poirot talking to a pleasant-faced young fellow of about my own age.

He introduced me.

"This is Captain Harvey, Hastings, one of the most famous members of your Intelligence Service."

"Not famous at all, I'm afraid," said the young man, laughing pleasantly.

"Not famous except to those in the know, I should have said. Most of Captain Harvey's friends and acquaintances consider him an amiable but brainless young man—devoted only to the trot of the fox or whatever the dance is called."

We both laughed.

"Well, well, to business," said Poirot. "You are of opinion the time has come, then?"

"We are sure of it, sir. China was isolated politically yesterday. What is going on out there, nobody knows. No news of any kind, wireless or otherwise, has come through—just a complete break—and silence!"

"Li Chang Yen has shown his hand. And the others?"

"Abe Ryland arrived in England a week ago, and left for the Continent yesterday."

"And Madame Olivier?"

"Madame Olivier left Paris last night."

"For Italy?"

"For Italy, sir. As far as we can judge, they are both making for the resort you indicated—though how you knew that——"

"Ah, that is not the cap with the feather for me! That was the work of Hastings here. He conceals his intelligence, you comprehend, but it is profound for all that."

Harvey looked at me with due appreciation, and I felt rather uncomfortable.

"All is in train, then," said Poirot. He was pale now, and completely serious. "The time has come. The arrangements are all made?"

"Everything you ordered has been carried out. The governments of Italy, France and England are behind you, and are all working harmoniously together."

"It is, in fact, a new Entente," observed Poirot dryly. "I am glad that Desjardeaux is convinced at last. *Eh bien*, then, we will start—or rather, I will start. You, Hastings, will remain here—yes, I pray of you. In verity, my friend, I am serious."

I believed him, but it was not likely that I should consent to being left behind in that fashion. Our argument was short but decisive.

It was not until we were in the train, speeding

towards Paris that he admitted that he was secretly glad of my decision.

"For you have a part to play, Hastings. An important part! Without you, I might well fail. Nevertheless, I felt that it was my duty to urge you to remain behind."

"There is danger, then?"

"*Mon ami*, where there is the Big Four there is always danger."

On arrival in Paris, we drove across to the Gare de l'Est, and Poirot at last announced our destination. We were bound for Bolzano and the Italian Tyrol.

During Harvey's absence from our carriage I took the opportunity of asking Poirot why he had said that the discovery of the rendezvous was my work.

"Because it was, my friend. How Ingles managed to get hold of the information I do not know, but he did, and he sent it to us by his servant. We are bound, *mon ami*, for Karersee, the new Italian name for which is Lago di Carezza. You see now where your 'Cara Zia' comes in and also your 'Carrozza' and 'Largo'—the Handel was supplied by your own imagination. Possibly some reference to the information coming from the 'hand' of M. Ingles started the train of association."

“Karersee?” I queried. “I never heard of it.”

“I always tell you that the English know no geography. But as a matter of fact it is a well-known and very beautiful summer resort, four thousand feet up, in the heart of the Dolomites.”

“And it is in this out of the way spot that the Big Four have their rendezvous?”

“Say rather their headquarters. The signal has been given, and it is their intention to disappear from the world and issue orders from their mountain fastness. I have made the inquiries—a lot of quarrying of stone and mineral deposits is done there, and the company, apparently a small Italian firm, is in reality controlled by Abe Ryland. I am prepared to swear that a vast subterranean dwelling has been hollowed out in the very heart of the mountain, secret and inaccessible. From there the leaders of the organisation will issue by wireless their orders to their followers who are numbered by thousands in every country. And from that crag in the Dolomites the dictators of the world will emerge. That is to say—they would emerge were it not for Hercule Poirot.”

“Do you seriously believe all this, Poirot? What about the armies and general machinery of civilisation?”

“What about it in Russia, Hastings? This will be Russia on an infinitely larger scale—and with this additional menace—that Madame Olivier’s experiments have proceeded further than she has ever given out. I believe that she has, to a certain extent, succeeded in liberating atomic energy and harnessing it to her purpose. Her experiments with the nitrogen of the air have been very remarkable, and she has also experimented in the concentration of wireless energy, so that a beam of great intensity can be focused upon some given spot. Exactly how far she has progressed, nobody knows, but it is certain that it is much farther than has ever been given out. She is a genius, that woman—the Curies were as nothing to her. Add to her genius the powers of Ryland’s almost unlimited wealth, and, with the brain of Li Chang Yen, the finest criminal brain ever known, to direct and plan—*eh bien*, it will not be, as you say, all jam for civilisation.”

His words made me very thoughtful. Although Poirot was given at times to exaggeration of language, he was not really an alarmist. For the first time I realised what a desperate struggle it was upon which we were engaged.

Harvey soon rejoined us and the journey went on.

We arrived at Bolzano about midday. From there the journey on was by motor. Several big blue motor-cars were waiting in the central square of the town, and we three got into one of them. Poirot, notwithstanding the heat of the day, was muffled to the eyes in great-coat and scarf. His eyes and the tips of his ears were all that could be seen of him.

I did not know whether this was due to precaution or merely his exaggerated fear of catching a chill. The motor journey took a couple of hours. It was a really wonderful drive. For the first part of the way we wound in and out of huge cliffs, with a trickling waterfall on one hand. Then we emerged into a fertile valley, which continued for some miles, and then, still winding steadily upwards, the bare rocky peaks began to show with dense clustering pinewoods at their base. The whole place was wild and lovely. Finally a series of abrupt curves, with the road running through the pinewoods on either side, and we came suddenly upon a big hotel and found that we had arrived.

Our rooms had been reserved for us, and under Harvey's guidance we went straight up to them. They looked straight out over the rocky peaks and the long slopes of pine woods leading up to them. Poirot made a gesture towards them.

"It is there?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," replied Harvey. "There is a place called the Felsenlabyrinth—all big boulders piled about in a most fantastic way—a path winds through them. The quarrying is to the right of that, but we think that the entrance is probably in the Felsenlabyrinth."

Poirot nodded.

"Come, *mon ami*," he said to me. "Let us go down and sit upon the terrace and enjoy the sunlight."

"You think that wise?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

The sunlight was marvellous—in fact the glare was almost too great for me. We had some creamy coffee instead of tea, then went upstairs and unpacked our few belongings. Poirot was in his most unapproachable mood, lost in a kind of reverie. Once or twice he shook his head and sighed.

I had been rather intrigued by a man who had got out of our train at Bolzano, and had been met by a private car. He was a small man, and the thing about him that had attracted my attention was that he was almost as much muffled up as Poirot had been. More so, indeed, for in addition to greatcoat and muffler, he was wearing huge blue spectacles. I was convinced that here we

had an emissary of the Big Four. Poirot did not seem very impressed by my idea, but when, leaning out of my bedroom window, I reported that the man in question was strolling about in the vicinity of the hotel, he admitted that there might be something in it.

I urged my friend not to go down to dinner, but he insisted on doing so. We entered the dining-room rather late, and were shown to a table by the window. As we sat down, our attention was attracted by an exclamation and a crash of falling china. A dish of haricot verts had been upset over a man who was sitting at the table next to ours.

The head waiter came up and was vociferous in apologies.

Presently, when the offending waiter was serving us with soup, Poirot spoke to him.

"An unfortunate accident, that. But it was not your fault."

"Monsieur saw that? No, indeed it was not my fault. The gentleman half sprung up from his chair—I thought he was going to have an attack of some kind. I could not save the catastrophe."

I saw Poirot's eyes shining with the green light I knew so well, and as the waiter departed he said to me in a low voice:—

"You see, Hastings, the effect of Hercule Poirot—alive and in the flesh?"

"You think——"

I had not time to continue. I felt Poirot's hand on my knee, as he whispered excitedly :

"Look, Hastings, look. *His trick with the bread!* Number Four!"

Sure enough, the man at the next table to ours, his face unusually pale, was dabbing a small piece of bread mechanically about the table.

I studied him carefully. His face, clean-shaven and puffily fat, was of a pasty, unhealthy sallowness, with heavy pouches under the eyes and deep lines running from his nose to the corners of his mouth. His age might have been anything from thirty-five to forty-five. In no particular did he resemble any one of the characters which Number Four had previously assumed. Indeed, had it not been for his little trick with the bread, of which he was evidently quite unaware, I would have sworn readily enough that the man sitting there was some one whom I had never seen before.

"He has recognised you," I murmured. "You should not have come down."

"My excellent Hastings, I have feigned death for three months for this one purpose."

“To startle Number Four?”

“To startle him at a moment when he must act quickly or not at all. And we have this great advantage—he does not know that we recognise him. He thinks that he is safe in his new disguise. How I bless Flossie Monro for telling us of that little habit of his.”

“What will happen now?” I asked.

“What can happen? He recognises the only man he fears, miraculously resurrected from the dead, at the very minute when the plans of the Big Four are in the balance. Madame Olivier and Abe Ryland lunched here to-day, and it is thought that they went to Cortina. Only we know that they have retired to their hiding place. How much do we know? That is what Number Four is asking himself at this minute. He dare take no risks. I must be suppressed at all costs. *Eh bien*, let him try to suppress Hercule Poirot! I shall be ready for him.”

As he finished speaking, the man at the next table got up and went out.

“He has gone to make his little arrangements,” said Poirot placidly. “Shall we have our coffee on the terrace, my friend? It would be pleasanter, I think. I will just go up and get a coat.”

I went out on to the terrace, a little disturbed in mind. Poirot's assurance did not quite content me. However, so long as we were on our guard, nothing could happen to us. I resolved to keep thoroughly on the alert.

It was quite five minutes before Poirot joined me. With his usual precautions against cold, he was muffled up to the ears. He sat down beside me and sipped his coffee appreciatively.

"Only in England is the coffee so atrocious," he remarked. "On the continent they understand how important it is for the digestion that it should be properly made."

As he finished speaking, the man from the next table suddenly appeared on the terrace. Without any hesitation, he came over and drew up a third chair to our table.

"You do not mind my joining you, I hope," he said in English.

"Not at all, monsieur," said Poirot.

I felt very uneasy. It is true that we were on the terrace of the hotel, with people all round us, but nevertheless I was not satisfied. I sensed the presence of danger.

Meanwhile Number Four chatted away in a perfectly natural manner. It seemed impossible to believe that he was anything but a *bona fide* tourist. He described excursions and motor

trips, and posed as quite an authority on the neighbourhood.

He took a pipe from his pocket and began to light it. Poirot drew out his case of tiny cigarettes. As he placed one between his lips, the stranger leant forward with a match.

“ Let me give you a light.”

As he spoke, without the least warning, all the lights went out. There was a chink of glass, and something pungent under my nose, suffocating me——

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE FELSENLABYRYNTH

I COULD not have been unconscious more than a minute. I came to myself being hustled along between two men. They had me under each arm, supporting my weight, and there was a gag in my mouth. It was pitch dark, but I gathered that we were not outside, but passing through the hotel. All round I could hear people shouting and demanding in every known language what had happened to the lights. My captors swung me down some stairs. We passed along a basement passage, then through a door and out into the open again through a glass door at the back of the hotel. In another moment we had gained the shelter of the pine trees.

I had caught a glimpse of another figure in a similar plight to myself, and realised that Poirot, too, was a victim of this bold coup.

By sheer audacity, Number Four had won the day. He had employed, I gathered, an instant anæsthetic, probably ethyl chloride—breaking a

small bulb of it under our noses. Then, in the confusion of the darkness, his accomplices, who had probably been guests sitting at the next table, had thrust gags in our mouths and hurried us away, taking us through the hotel to baffle pursuit.

I cannot describe the hour that followed. We were hurried through the woods at a break-neck pace, going uphill the whole time. At last we emerged in the open, on the mountain-side, and I saw just in front of us an extraordinary conglomeration of fantastic rocks and boulders.

This must be the Felsenlabyrinth of which Harvey had spoken. Soon we were winding in and out of its recesses. The place was like a maze devised by some evil genie.

Suddenly we stopped. An enormous rock barred our path. One of the men stooped and seemed to push on something when, without a sound, the huge mass of rock turned on itself and disclosed a small tunnel-like opening leading into the mountain-side.

Into this we were hurried. For some time the tunnel was narrow, but presently it widened, and before very long we came out into a wide rocky chamber lighted by electricity. There the gags were removed. At a sign from Number

Four, who stood facing us with mocking triumph in his face, we were searched and every article was removed from our pockets, including Poirot's little automatic pistol.

A pang smote me as it was tossed down on the table. We were defeated—hopelessly defeated and outnumbered. It was the end.

“Welcome to the headquarters of the Big Four, M. Hercule Poirot,” said Number Four in a mocking tone. “To meet you again is an unexpected pleasure. But was it worth while returning from the grave only for this?”

Poirot did not reply. I dared not look at him.

“Come this way,” continued Number Four. “Your arrival will be somewhat of a surprise to my colleagues.”

He indicated a narrow doorway in the wall. We passed through and found ourselves in another chamber. At the very end of it was a table behind which four chairs were placed. The end chair was empty, but was draped with a mandarin's cape. On the second, smoking a cigar, sat Mr. Abe Ryland. Leaning back on the third chair, with her burning eyes and her nun's face, was Madame Olivier. Number Four took his seat on the fourth chair.

We were in the presence of the Big Four.

Never before had I felt so fully the reality and the presence of Li Chang Yen as I did now when confronting his empty seat. Far away in China, he yet controlled and directed this malign organisation.

Madame Olivier gave a faint cry on seeing us. Ryland, more self-controlled, only shifted his cigar, and raised his grizzled eyebrows.

"M. Hercule Poirot," said Ryland slowly. "This is a pleasant surprise. You put it over on us all right. We thought you were good and buried. No matter, the game is up now."

There was a ring as of steel in his voice. Madame Olivier said nothing, but her eyes burned, and I disliked the slow way she smiled.

"Madame and messieurs, I wish you good-evening," said Poirot quietly.

Something unexpected, something I had not been prepared to hear in his voice made me look at him. He seemed quite composed. Yet there was something about his whole appearance that was different.

Then there was a stir of draperies behind us, and the Countess Vera Rossakoff came in.

"Ah!" said Number Four. "Our valued and trusted lieutenant. An old friend of yours is here, my dear lady."

The countess whirled round with her usual vehemence of movement.

"God in Heaven!" she cried. "It is the little man! Ah! but he has the nine lives of a cat! Oh, little man, little man! Why did you mix yourself up in this?"

"Madame," said Poirot, with a bow. "Me, like the great Napoleon, I am on the side of the big battalions."

As he spoke I saw a sudden suspicion flash into her eyes, and at the same moment I knew the truth which subconsciously I already sensed.

The man beside me was not Hercule Poirot.

He was very like him, extraordinarily like him. There was the same egg-shaped head, the same strutting figure, delicately plump. But the voice was different, and the eyes instead of being green were dark, and surely the moustaches—those famous moustaches——?

My reflections were cut short by the countess's voice. She stepped forward, her voice ringing with excitement.

"You have been deceived. That man is not Hercule Poirot!"

Number Four uttered an incredulous exclamation, but the countess leant forward and snatched

at Poirot's moustaches. They came off in her hand, and then, indeed, the truth was plain. For this man's upper lip was disfigured by a small scar which completely altered the expression of the face.

"Not Hercule Poirot," muttered Number Four. "But who can he be then?"

"I know," I cried suddenly, and then stopped dead, afraid I had ruined anything.

But the man I will still refer to as Poirot had turned to me encouragingly.

"Say it if you will. It makes no matter now. The trick has succeeded."

"This is Achille Poirot," I said slowly. "Hercule Poirot's twin brother."

"Impossible," said Ryland sharply, but he was shaken.

"Hercule's plan has succeeded to a marvel," said Achille placidly.

Number Four leapt forward, his voice harsh and menacing.

"Succeeded, has it?" he snarled. "Do you realise that before many minutes have passed you will be dead—dead?"

"Yes," said Achille Poirot gravely. "I realise that. It is you who do not realise that a man may be willing to purchase success by his life. There were men who laid down their life

for their country in the war. I am prepared to lay down mine in the same way for the world."

It struck me just then that although perfectly willing to lay down my life I might have been consulted in the matter. Then I remember how Poirot had urged me to stay behind and I felt appeased.

"And in what way will your laying down your life benefit the world?" asked Ryland sardonically.

"I see that you do not perceive the true inwardness of Hercule's plan. To begin with, your place of retreat was known some months ago, and practically all the visitors, hotel assistants and others are detectives or Secret Service men. A cordon has been drawn round the mountain. You may have more than one means of egress, but even so you cannot escape. Poirot himself is directing the operations outside. My boots were smeared with a preparation of aniseed to-night, before I came down to the terrace in my brother's place. Hounds are following the trail. It will lead them infallibly to the rock in the Felsenlabyrinth where the entrance is situated. You see, do what you will to us, the net is drawn tightly round you. You cannot escape."

Madame Olivier laughed suddenly.

"You are wrong. There is one way we can escape, and, like Samson of old, destroy our enemies at the same time. What do you say, my friends?"

Ryland was staring at Achille Poirot.

"Suppose he's lying," he said hoarsely.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"In an hour it will be dawn. Then you can see for yourself the truth of my words. Already they should have traced me to the entrance in the Felsenlabyrinth."

Even as he spoke, there was a far off reverberation, and a man ran in shouting incoherently. Ryland sprang up and went out. Madame Olivier moved to the end of the room and opened a door that I had not noticed. Inside I caught a glimpse of a perfectly equipped laboratory which reminded me of the one in Paris. Number Four also sprang up and went out. He returned with Poirot's revolver which he gave to the countess.

"There is no danger of their escaping," he said grimly. "But still you had better have this."

Then he went out again.

The countess came over to us and surveyed my companion attentively for some time. Suddenly she laughed.

"You are very clever, M. Achille Poirot," she said mockingly.

"Madame, let us talk business. It is fortunate that they have left us alone together. What is your price?"

"I do not understand. What price?"

"Madame, you can aid us to escape. You know the secret ways out of this retreat. I ask you, what is your price?"

She laughed again.

"More than you could pay, little man! Why, all the money in the world would not buy me!"

"Madame, I did not speak of money. I am a man of intelligence. Nevertheless, this is a true fact—*every one has his price!* In exchange for life and liberty, I offer you your heart's desire."

"So you are a magician!"

"You can call me so if you like."

The countess suddenly dropped her jesting manner. She spoke with passionate bitterness.

"Fool! My heart's desire! Can you give me revenge upon my enemies? Can you give me back youth and beauty and a gay heart? Can you bring the dead to life again?"

Achille Poirot was watching her very curiously.

"Which of the three, Madame? Make your choice."

She laughed sardonically.

"You will sell me the Elixir of Life, perhaps? Come, I will make a bargain with you. Once, I had a child. Find my child for me—and you shall go free."

"Madame, I agree. It is a bargain. Your child shall be restored to you. On the faith of—on the faith of Hercule Poirot himself."

Again that strange woman laughed—this time long and unrestrainedly.

"My dear M. Poirot, I am afraid I laid a little trap for you. It is very kind of you to promise to find my child for me, but, you see, I happen to know that you would not succeed, and so that would be a very one-sided bargain, would it not?"

"Madame, I swear to you by the Holy Angels that I will restore your child to you."

"I asked you before, M. Poirot, could you restore the dead to life?"

"Then the child is——"

"Dead? Yes."

He stepped forward and took her wrist.

"Madame, I—I who speak to you, swear once more. *I will bring the dead to life.*"

She stared at him as though fascinated.

"You do not believe me. I will prove my words. Get my pocket-book which they took from me."

She went out of the room, and returned with it in her hand. Throughout all she retained her grip on the revolver. I felt that Achille Poirot's chances of bluffing her were very slight. The Countess Vera Rossakoff was no fool.

"Open it, madame. The flap on the left hand side. That is right. Now take out that photograph and look at it."

Wonderingly, she took out what seemed to be a small snapshot. No sooner had she looked at it than she uttered a cry and swayed as though about to fall. Then she almost flew at my companion.

"Where? Where? You shall tell me. Where?"

"Remember your bargain, madame."

"Yes, yes, I will trust you. Quick, before they come back."

Catching him by the hand, she drew him quickly and silently out of the room. I followed. From the outer room she led us into the tunnel by which we had first entered, but a short way along this forked, and she turned off to the right.

Again and again the passage divided, but she led us on, never faltering or seeming to doubt her way, and with increasing speed.

"If only we are in time," she panted. "We must be out in the open before the explosion occurs."

Still we went on. I understood that this tunnel led right through the mountain and that we should finally emerge on the other side, facing a different valley. The sweat streamed down my face, but I raced on.

And then, far away, I saw a gleam of daylight. Nearer and nearer. I saw green bushes growing. We forced them aside, pushed our way through. We were in the open again, with the faint light of dawn making everything rosy.

Poirot's cordon was a reality. Even as we emerged, three men fell upon us, but released us again with a cry of astonishment.

"Quick," cried my companion. "Quick—there is no time to lose——"

But he was not destined to finish. The earth shook and trembled under our feet, there was a terrific roar and the whole mountain seemed to dissolve. We were flung headlong through the air.

.

I came to myself at last. I was in a strange

bed and a strange room. Some one was sitting by the window. He turned and came and stood by me.

It was Achille Poirot—or, stay, was it——

The well-known ironical voice dispelled any doubts I might have had.

“But yes, my friend, it is I. Brother Achille has gone home again—to the land of myths. It was I all the time. It is not only Number Four who can act a part. Belladonna in the eyes, the sacrifice of the moustaches, and a real scar the inflicting of which caused me much pain two months ago—but I could not risk a fake beneath the eagle eyes of Number Four. And the final touch, your own knowledge and belief that there was such a person as Achille Poirot ! It was invaluable, the assistance you rendered me, half the success of the coup is due to you ! The whole crux of the affair was to make them believe that Hercule Poirot was still at large directing operations. Otherwise, everything was true, the aniseed, the cordon, etc.”

“But why not really send a substitute ? ”

“And let you go into danger without me by your side. You have a pretty idea of me there ! Besides, I always had a hope of finding a way out through the countess.”

“How on earth did you manage to convince

her? It was a pretty thin story to make her swallow—all that about a dead child.”

“The countess has a great deal more perspicacity than you have, my dear Hastings. She was taken in at first by my disguise; but she soon saw through it. When she said, ‘You are very clever, M. Achille Poirot,’ I knew that she had guessed the truth. It was then or never to play my trump card.”

“All that rigmarole about bringing the dead to life?”

“Exactly—but then, you see, I had the child all along.”

“*What?*”

“But yes! You know my motto—Be prepared. As soon as I found that the Countess Rossakoff was mixed up with the Big Four, I had every possible inquiry made as to her antecedents. I learned that she had had a child who was reported to have been killed, and I also found that there were discrepancies in the story which led me to wonder whether it might not, after all, be alive. In the end, I succeeded in tracing the boy, and by paying out a big sum I obtained possession of the child’s person. The poor little fellow was nearly dead of starvation. I placed him in a safe place, with kindly people, and took a snapshot of him in his new

surroundings. And so, when the time came, I had my little coup de theatre all ready ! ”

“ You are wonderful, Poirot ; absolutely wonderful ! ”

“ I was glad to do it, too. For I had admired the countess. I should have been sorry if she had perished in the explosion.”

“ I’ve been half afraid to ask you—what of the Big Four ? ”

“ All the bodies have now been recovered. That of Number Four was quite unrecognisable, the head blown to pieces. I wish—I rather wish it had not been so. I should have liked to be *sure*—but no more of that. Look at this.”

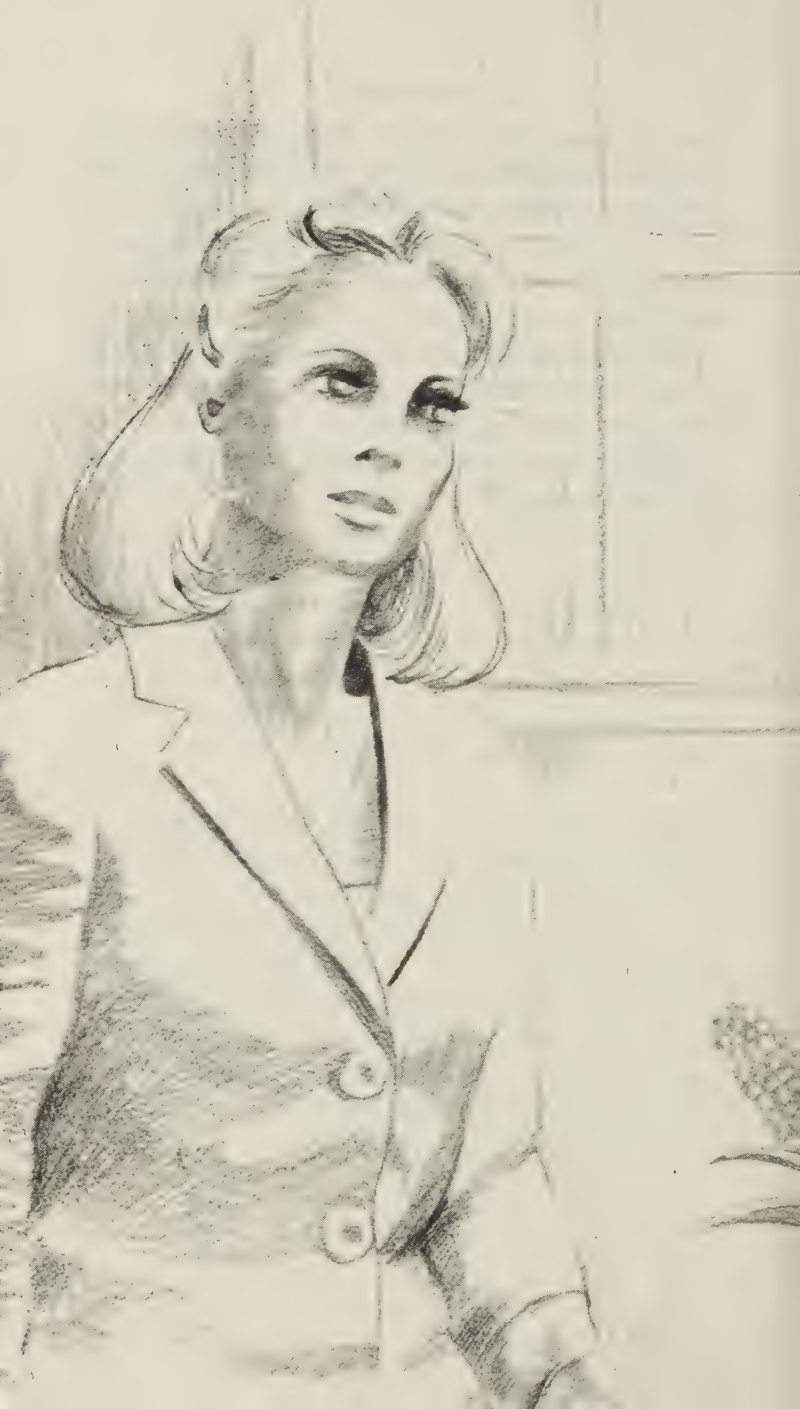
He handed me a newspaper in which a paragraph was marked. It reported the death, by suicide, of Li Chang Yen, who had engineered the recent revolution which had failed so disastrously.

“ My great opponent,” said Poirot gravely. “ It was fated that he and I should never meet in the flesh. When he received the news of the disaster here, he took the simplest way out. A great brain, my friend, a great brain. But I wish I had seen the face of the man who was Number Four. . . . Supposing that, after all—but I romance. He is dead. Yes, *mon ami*, together we have faced and routed the Big Four ;

and now you will return to your charming wife, and I—I shall retire. The great case of my life is over. Anything else will seem tame after this. No, I shall retire. Possibly I shall grow vegetable marrows ! I might even marry and range myself ! ”

He laughed heartily at the idea, but with a touch of embarrassment. I hope . . . small men always admire big, flamboyant women——

“ Marry and range myself,” he said again. “ Who knows ? ”



Murder in Mesopotamia

DEDICATED TO
MY MANY ARCHAEOLOGICAL FRIENDS
IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

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FOREWORD

BY GILES REILLY, M.D.

THE EVENTS chronicled in this narrative took place some four years ago. Circumstances have rendered it necessary, in my opinion, that a straightforward account of them should be given to the public. There have been the wildest and most ridiculous rumours suggesting that important evidence was suppressed and other nonsense of that kind. Those misconstructions have appeared more especially in the American press.

For obvious reasons it was desirable that the account should not come from the pen of one of the expedition staff, who might reasonably be supposed to be prejudiced.

I therefore suggested to Miss Amy Leatheran that she should undertake the task. She is obviously the person to do it. She has a professional character of the highest, she is not biased by having any previous connection with the University of Pittstown Expedition to Iraq and she was an observant and intelligent eye-witness.

It was not very easy to persuade Miss Leatheran to undertake this task—in fact, persuading her was one of the hardest jobs of my professional career—and even after it was completed she displayed a curious reluctance to let me see the manuscript. I discovered that this was partly due to some critical remarks she had made concerning my daughter Sheila. I soon disposed of that, assuring her that as children criticise their parents freely in print nowadays, parents are only too delighted when their offspring come in for their share of abuse! Her other objection was extreme modesty about her literary style. She hoped I would ‘put the grammar right and all that.’ I have, on the contrary, refused to alter so much as a single word. Miss Leatheran’s style in my opinion is vigorous, individual and entirely apposite. If she calls Hercule Poirot ‘Poirot’ in one paragraph and ‘Mr. Poirot’ in the next, such a variation is both

interesting and suggestive. At one moment she is, so to speak, 'remembering her manners' (and hospital nurses are great sticklers for etiquette) and at the next her interest in what she is telling is that of a pure human being—cap and cuffs forgotten!

The only thing I have done is to take the liberty of writing a first chapter—aided by a letter kindly supplied by one of Miss Leatheran's friends. It is intended to be in the nature of a frontispiece—that is, it gives a rough sketch of the narrator.

CHAPTER I

FRONTISPIECE

IN THE HALL of the Tigris Palace Hotel in Baghdad a hospital nurse was finishing a letter. Her fountain-pen drove briskly over the paper.

'... Well dear, I think that's really all my news. I must say it's been nice to see a bit of the world—though England for me every time, thank you! The dirt and the mess in Baghdad you wouldn't believe—and not romantic at all like you'd think from the "Arabian Nights!" Of course, it's pretty just on the river, but the town itself is just awful—and no proper shops at all. Major Kelsey took me through the bazaars, and of course there's no denying they're quaint—but just a lot of rubbish and hammering away at copper pans till they make your head ache—and not what I'd like to use myself unless I was sure about the cleaning. You've got to be so careful of verdigris with copper pans.

'I'll write and let you know if anything comes of the job that Dr. Reilly spoke about. He said this American gentleman was in Baghdad now and might come and see me this afternoon. It's for his wife—she has "fancies," so Dr. Reilly said. He didn't say any more than that, and of course, dear, one knows what that usually means (but I hope not actually D.T.'s!). Of course, Dr. Reilly didn't say anything—but he had a look—if you know what I mean. This Dr. Leidner is an archaeologist and is digging up a mound out in the desert somewhere for some American museum.

'Well, dear, I will close now. I thought what you told me about little Stubbins was simply killing! Whatever did Matron say?

'No more now.

'Yours ever,

'Amy Leatheran.'

Enclosing the letter in an envelope, she addressed it to Sister Curshaw, St. Christopher's Hospital, London.

As she put the cap on her fountain-pen, one of the native boys approached her.

'A gentleman come see you. Dr. Leidner.'

Nurse Leatheran turned. She saw a man of middle height with slightly stooping shoulders, a brown beard and gentle tired eyes.

Dr. Leidner saw a woman of thirty-five of erect, confident bearing. He saw a good-humoured face with slightly prominent blue eyes and glossy brown hair. She looked, he thought, just what a hospital nurse for a nervous case ought to look. Cheerful, robust, shrewd and matter of fact.

Nurse Leatheran, he thought, would do.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCING AMY LEATHERAN

I DON'T PRETEND to be an author or to know anything about writing. I'm doing this simply because Dr. Reilly asked me to, and somehow when Dr. Reilly asks you to do a thing you don't like to refuse.

'Oh, but, doctor,' I said, 'I'm not literary—not literary at all.'

'Nonsense!' he said. 'Treat it as case notes, if you like.'

Well, of course, you *can* look at it that way.

Dr. Reilly went on. He said that an unvarnished plain account of the Tell Yarimjah business was badly needed.

'If one of the interested parties writes it, it won't carry conviction. They'll say it's biased one way or another.'

And of course that was true, too. I was in it all and yet an outsider, so to speak.

'Why don't you write it yourself, doctor?' I asked.

'I wasn't on the spot—you were. Besides,' he added with a sigh, 'my daughter won't let me.'

The way he knuckles under to that chit of a girl of his is downright disgraceful. I had half a mind to say so, when I saw that his eyes were twinkling. That was the worst of Dr. Reilly. You never knew whether he was joking or not. He always said things in the same slow melancholy way—but half the time there was a twinkle underneath it.

'Well,' I said doubtfully. 'I suppose I *could*.'

'Of course you could.'

'Only I don't quite know how to set about it.'

'There's a good precedent for that. Begin at the beginning, go on to the end and then leave off.'

'I don't even know quite where and what the beginning was,' I said doubtfully.

'Believe me, nurse, the difficulty of beginning will be nothing to the difficulty of knowing how to stop. At least that's the way it is with me when I have to make a speech. Some one's got to catch hold of my coat-tails and pull me down by main force.'

'Oh, you're joking, doctor.'

'It's profoundly serious I am. Now what about it?'

Another thing was worrying me. After hesitating a moment or two I said:

'You know, doctor, I'm afraid I might tend to be—well, a little *personal* sometimes.'

'God bless my soul, woman, the more personal you are the better! This is a story of human beings—not dummies! Be personal—be prejudiced—be catty—be anything you please! Write the thing your own way. We can always prune out the bits that are libellous afterwards! You go ahead. You're a sensible woman, and you'll give a sensible common-sense account of the business.'

So that was that, and I promised to do my best.

And here I am beginning, but as I said to the doctor, it's difficult to know just where to start.

I suppose I ought to say a word or two about myself. I'm thirty-two and my name is Amy Leatheran. I took my training at St. Christopher's and after that did two years maternity. I did a certain amount of private work and I was for four years at Miss Bendix's Nursing Home in Devonshire Place. I came out to Iraq with a Mrs. Kelsey. I'd attended her when her baby was born. She was coming out to Baghdad with her husband and had already got a children's nurse booked who had been for some years with friends of hers out there. Their children were coming home and going to school, and the nurse had agreed to go to Mrs. Kelsey when they left. Mrs. Kelsey was delicate and nervous about the journey out with so young a child, so Major Kelsey arranged that I should come out with her and look after her and the baby. They would pay my passage home unless we found some one needing a nurse for the return journey.

Well, there is no need to describe the Kelseys—the baby was a little love and Mrs. Kelsey quite nice, though rather the fretting kind. I enjoyed the voyage very much. I'd never been a long trip on the sea before.

Dr. Reilly was on board the boat. He was a black-haired, long-faced man who said all sorts of funny things in a low, sad voice. I think he enjoyed pulling my leg and used to make the most

extraordinary statements to see if I would swallow them. He was the civil surgeon at a place called Hassanieh—a day and a half's journey from Baghdad.

I had been about a week in Baghdad when I ran across him and he asked when I was leaving the Kelseys. I said that it was funny his asking that because as a matter of fact the Wrights (the other people I mentioned) were going home earlier than they had meant to and their nurse was free to come straightaway.

He said that he had heard about the Wrights and that that was why he had asked me.

'As a matter of fact, nurse, I've got a possible job for you.'

'A case?'

He screwed his face up as though considering.

'You could hardly call it a case. It's just a lady who has—shall we say—fancies?'

'Oh!' I said.

(One usually knows what *that* means—drink or drugs!)

Dr. Reilly didn't explain further. He was very discreet.

'Yes,' he said. 'A Mrs. Leidner. Husband's an American—an American Swede to be exact. He's the head of a large American dig.'

And he explained how this expedition was excavating the site of a big Assyrian city something like Nineveh. The expedition house was not actually very far from Hassanieh, but it was a lonely spot and Dr. Leidner had been worried for some time about his wife's health.

'He's not been very explicit about it, but it seems she has these fits of recurring nervous terrors.'

'Is she left alone all day amongst natives?' I asked.

'Oh, no, there's quite a crowd—seven or eight. I don't fancy she's ever alone in the house. But there seems to be no doubt that she's worked herself up into a queer state. Leidner has any amount of work on his shoulders, but he's crazy about his wife and it worries him to know she's in this state. He felt he'd be happier if he knew that some responsible person with expert knowledge was keeping an eye on her.'

'And what does Mrs. Leidner herself think about it?'

Dr. Reilly answered gravely.

'Mrs. Leidner is a very lovely lady. She's seldom of the same mind about anything two days on end. But on the whole she favours the idea.' He added, 'She's an odd woman. A mass of affectation

and, I should fancy, a champion liar—but Leidner seems honestly to believe that she is scared out of her life by something or other.'

'What did she herself say to you, doctor?'

'Oh, she hasn't consulted me! She doesn't like me anyway—for several reasons. It was Leidner who came to me and propounded this plan. Well, nurse, what do you think of the idea? You'd see something of the country before you go home—they'll be digging for another two months. And excavation is quite interesting work.'

After a moment's hesitation while I turned the matter over in my mind:

'Well,' I said. 'I really think I might try it.'

'Splendid,' said Dr. Reilly, rising. 'Leidner's in Baghdad now. I'll tell him to come round and see if he can fix things up with you.'

Dr. Leidner came to the hotel that afternoon. He was a middle-aged man with a rather nervous, hesitating manner. There was something gentle and kindly and rather helpless about him.

He sounded very devoted to his wife, but he was very vague about what was the matter with her.

'You see,' he said, tugging at his beard in a rather perplexed manner that I later came to know to be characteristic of him, 'my wife is really in a very nervous state. I—I'm quite worried about her.'

'She is in good physical health?' I asked.

'Yes—oh, yes, I think so. No, I should not think there was anything the matter with her physically. But she—well—imagines things, you know.'

'What kind of things?' I asked.

But he shied off from the point, merely murmuring perplexedly:

'She works herself up over nothing at all. . . . I really can see no foundations for these fears.'

'Fears of what, Dr. Leidner?'

He said vaguely, 'Oh, just—nervous terrors, you know.'

Ten to one, I thought to myself, it's drugs. And he doesn't realise it! Lots of men don't. Just wonder why their wives are so jumpy and have such extraordinary changes of mood.

I asked whether Mrs. Leidner herself approved of the idea of my coming.

His face lighted up.

'Yes. I was surprised. Most pleasurably surprised. She said it was a very good idea. She said she would feel very much safer.'

MURDER IN MESOPOTAMIA

The word struck me oddly. *Safer*. A very queer word to use. I began to surmise that Mrs. Leidner might be a mental case.

He went on with a kind of boyish eagerness.

'I'm sure you'll get on very well with her. She's really a very charming woman.' He smiled disarmingly. 'She feels you'll be the greatest comfort to her. I felt the same as soon as I saw you. You look, if you will allow me to say so, so splendidly healthy and full of common sense. I'm sure you're just the person for Louise.'

'Well, we can but try, Dr. Leidner,' I said cheerfully. 'I'm sure I hope I can be of use to your wife. Perhaps she's nervous of natives and coloured people?'

'Oh, dear me no.' He shook his head, amused at the idea. 'My wife likes Arabs very much—she appreciates their simplicity and their sense of humour. This is only her second season—we have been married less than two years—but she already speaks quite a fair amount of Arabic.'

I was silent for a moment or two, then I had one more try.

'Can't you tell me at all what it is your wife is afraid of, Dr. Leidner?' I asked.

He hesitated. Then he said slowly, 'I hope—I believe—that she will tell you that herself.'

And that's all I could get out of him.

CHAPTER III

GOSSIP

IT WAS ARRANGED that I should go to Tell Yarimjah the following week.

Mrs. Kelsey was settling into her house at Alwiyah, and I was glad to be able to take a few things off her shoulders.

During that time I heard one or two allusions to the Leidner expedition. A friend of Mrs. Kelsey's, a young squadron-leader, pursed his lips in surprise as he exclaimed:

'Lovely Louise. So that's her latest!' He turned to me. 'That's our nickname for her, nurse. She's always known as Lovely Louise.'

'Is she so very handsome then?' I asked.

'It's taking her at her own valuation. *She* thinks she is!'

'Now don't be spiteful, John,' said Mrs. Kelsey. 'You know it's not

only she who thinks so! Lots of people have been very smitten by her.'

'Perhaps you're right. She's a bit long in the tooth, but she has a certain attraction.'

'You were completely bowled over yourself,' said Mrs. Kelsey, laughing.

The squadron-leader blushed and admitted rather shamefacedly:

'Well, she has a way with her. As for Leidner himself, he worships the ground she walks on—and all the rest of the expedition has to worship too! It's expected of them!'

'How many are there altogether?' I asked.

'All sorts and nationalities, nurse,' said the squadron-leader cheerfully. 'An English architect, a French Father from Carthage—he does the inscriptions—tablets and things, you know. And then there's Miss Johnson. She's English too—sort of general bottle-washer. And a little plump man who does the photography—he's an American. And the Mercados. Heaven knows what nationality they are—Dagos of some kind! She's quite young—a snaky-looking creature—and oh! doesn't she hate Lovely Louise! And there are a couple of youngsters, and that's the lot. A few odd fish, but nice on the whole—don't you agree, Pennyman?'

He was appealing to an elderly man who was sitting thoughtfully twirling a pair of pince-nez.

The latter started and looked up.

'Yes—yes—very nice indeed. Taken individually, that is. Of course, Mercado is rather a queer fish——'

'He has such a very *odd* beard,' put in Mrs. Kelsey. 'A queer limp kind.'

Major Pennyman went on without noticing her interruption.

'The young 'uns are both nice. The American's rather silent, and the English boy talks a bit too much. Funny, it's usually the other way round. Leidner himself is a delightful fellow—so modest and unassuming. Yes, individually they are all pleasant people. But somehow or other, I may have been fanciful, but the last time I went to see them I got a queer impression of something being wrong. I don't know what it was exactly. . . . Nobody seemed quite natural. There was a queer atmosphere of tension. I can explain best what I mean by saying that they all passed the butter to each other too politely.'

Blushing a little, because I don't like airing my own opinions too much, I said:

'If people are too much cooped up together it's got a way of getting on their nerves. I know that myself from experience in hospital.'

'That's true,' said Major Kelsey, 'but it's early in the season, hardly time for that particular irritation to have set in.'

'An expedition is probably like our life here in miniature,' said Major Pennyman. 'It has its cliques and rivalries and jealousies.'

'It sounds as though they'd got a good many new-comers this year,' said Major Kelsey.

'Let me see.' The squadron-leader counted them off on his fingers. 'Young Coleman is new, so is Reiter. Emmott was out last year and so were the Mercados. Father Lavigny is a new-comer. He's come in place of Dr. Byrd, who was ill this year and couldn't come out. Carey of course, is an old hand. He's been out ever since the beginning, five years ago. Miss Johnson's been out nearly as many years as Carey.'

'I always thought they got on so well together at Tell Yarimjah,' remarked Major Kelsey. 'They seemed like a happy family—which is really surprising when one considers what human nature is! I'm sure Nurse Leatheran agrees with me.'

'Well,' I said. 'I don't know that you're not right! The rows I've known in hospital and starting often from nothing more than a dispute about a pot of tea.'

'Yes, one tends to get petty in close communities,' said Major Pennyman. 'All the same I feel there must be something more to it in this case. Leidner is such a gentle, unassuming man, with really a remarkable amount of tact. He's always managed to keep his expedition happy and on good terms with each other. And yet I *did* notice that feeling of tension the other day.'

Mrs. Kelsey laughed.

'And you don't see the explanation? Why, it leaps to the eye!'

'What do you mean?'

'Mrs. Leidner, of course.'

'Oh come, Mary,' said her husband, 'she's a charming woman—not at all the quarrelsome kind.'

'I didn't say she was quarrelsome. She *causes* quarrels!'

'In what way? And why should she?'

'Why? Why? Because she's bored. She's not an archaeologist, only the wife of one. She's bored shut away from any excitements and so she provides her own drama. She amuses herself by setting other people by the ears.'

'Mary, you don't know in the least. You're merely imagining.'

'Of course I'm imagining! But you'll find I'm right. Lovely Louise doesn't look like the Mona Lisa for nothing! She mayn't mean any harm, but she likes to see what will happen.'

'She's devoted to Leidner.'

'Oh! I dare say. I'm not suggesting vulgar intrigues. But she's an *allumeuse*, that woman.'

'Women are so sweet to each other,' said Major Kelsey.

'I know. Cat, cat, cat, that's what you men say. But we're usually right about our own sex.'

'All the same,' said Major Pennyman thoughtfully, 'assuming all Mrs. Kelsey's uncharitable surmises to be true I don't think it would quite account for that curious sense of tension—rather like the feeling there is before a thunderstorm. I had the impression very strongly that the storm might break any minute.'

'Now don't frighten nurse,' said Mrs. Kelsey. 'She's going there in three days' time and you'll put her right off.'

'Oh, you won't frighten me,' I said, laughing.

All the same I thought a good deal about what had been said. Dr. Leidner's curious use of the word 'safer' recurred to me. Was it his wife's secret fear, unacknowledged or expressed perhaps, that was reacting on the rest of the party? Or was it the actual tension (or perhaps the unknown cause of it) that was reacting on *her* nerves?

I looked up the word 'allumeuse' that Mrs. Kelsey had used in a dictionary, but couldn't get any sense out of it.

'Well,' I thought to myself, 'I must wait and see.'

CHAPTER IV

I ARRIVE IN HASSANIEH

THREE DAYS LATER I left Baghdad.

I was sorry to leave Mrs. Kelsey and the baby, who was a little love and was thriving splendidly, gaining her proper number of ounces every week. Major Kelsey took me to the station and saw me off. I should arrive at Kirkuk the following morning, and there some one was to meet me.

I slept badly. I never sleep very well in a train and I was troubled by dreams.

The next morning, however, when I looked out of the window it was a lovely day and I felt interested and curious about the people I was going to see.

As I stood on the platform hesitating and looking about me I saw a young man coming towards me. He had a round pink face, and really, in all my life, I have never seen any one who seemed so exactly like a young man out of one of Mr. P. G. Wodehouse's books.

'Hallo, 'allo, 'allo,' he said. 'Are you Nurse Leatheran? Well, I mean you must be—I can see that. Ha ha! My name's Coleman. Dr. Leidner sent me along. How are you feeling? Beastly journey and all that? Don't I know these trains! Well, here we are—had any breakfast? This your kit? I say, awfully modest, aren't you? Mrs. Leidner has four suitcases and a trunk—to say nothing of a hat-box and a patent pillow, and this, that and the other. Am I talking too much? Come along to the old bus.'

There was what I heard called later a station wagon waiting outside. It was a little like a wagonette, a little like a lorry and a little like a car. Mr. Coleman helped me in, explaining that I had better sit next to the driver so as to get less jolting.

Jolting! I wonder the whole contraption didn't fall to pieces! And nothing like a road—just a sort of track all ruts and holes. Glorious East indeed! When I thought of our splendid arterial roads in England it made me quite homesick.

Mr. Coleman leaned forward from his seat behind me and yelled in my ear a good deal.

'Track's in pretty good condition,' he shouted just after we had all been thrown up in our seats till we nearly touched the roof.

And apparently he was speaking quite seriously.

'Very good for you—jogs the liver,' he said. 'You ought to know that, nurse.'

'A stimulated liver won't be much good to me if my head's split open,' I observed tartly.

'You should come along here after it's rained! The skids are glorious. Most of the time one's going sideways.'

To this I did not respond.

Presently we had to cross the river, which we did on the craziest ferry-boat you can imagine. To my mind it was a mercy we ever got across, but every one seemed to think it was quite usual.

It took us about four hours to get to Hassanieh, which, to my surprise, was quite a big place. Very pretty it looked, too, before

we got there from the other side of the river—standing up quite white and fairy-like with minarets. It was a bit different, though, when one had crossed the bridge and come right into it. Such a smell, and everything ramshackle and tumble-down, and mud and mess everywhere.

Mr. Coleman took me to Dr. Reilly's house, where, he said, the doctor was expecting me to lunch.

Dr. Reilly was just as nice as ever, and his house was nice too, with a bathroom and everything spick and span. I had a nice bath, and by the time I got back into my uniform and came down I was feeling fine.

Lunch was just ready and we went in, the doctor apologising for his daughter, whom he said was always late.

We'd just had a very good dish of eggs in sauce when she came in and Dr. Reilly said, 'Nurse, this is my daughter Sheila.'

She shook hands, hoped I'd had a good journey, tossed off her hat, gave a cool nod to Mr. Coleman and sat down.

'Well, Bill,' she said. 'How's everything?'

He began to talk to her about some party or other that was to come off at the club, and I took stock of her.

I can't say I took to her much. A thought too cool for my liking. An off-hand sort of girl, though good-looking. Black hair and blue eyes—a pale sort of face and the usual lip-sticked mouth. She'd a cool, sarcastic way of talking that rather annoyed me. I had a probationer like her under me once—a girl who worked well, I'll admit, but whose manner always riled me.

It looked to me rather as though Mr. Coleman was gone on her. He stammered a bit, and his conversation became slightly more idiotic than it was before, if that was possible! He reminded me of a large stupid dog wagging its tail and trying to please.

After lunch Dr. Reilly went off to the hospital, and Mr. Coleman had some things to get in the town, and Miss Reilly asked me whether I'd like to see round the town a bit or whether I'd rather stop in the house. Mr. Coleman, she said, would be back to fetch me in about an hour.

'Is there anything to see?' I asked.

'There are some picturesque corners,' said Miss Reilly. 'But I don't know that you'd care for them. They're extremely dirty.'

The way she said it rather nettled me. I've never been able to see that picturesqueness excuses dirt.

In the end she took me to the club, which was pleasant enough, overlooking the river, and there were English papers and magazines there.

When we got back to the house Mr. Coleman wasn't there yet, so we sat down and talked a bit. It wasn't easy somehow.

She asked me if I'd met Mrs. Leidner yet.

'No,' I said. 'Only her husband.'

'Oh,' she said. 'I wonder what you'll think of her?'

I didn't say anything to that. And she went on:

'I like Dr. Leidner very much. Everybody likes him.'

That's as good as saying, I thought, that you don't like his wife.

I still didn't say anything and presently she asked abruptly:

'What's the matter with her? Did Dr. Leidner tell you?'

I wasn't going to start gossiping about a patient before I got there even, so I said evasively:

'I understand she's a bit run down and wants looking after.'

She laughed—a nasty sort of laugh—hard and abrupt.

'Good God,' she said. 'Aren't nine people looking after her already enough?'

'I suppose they've all got their work to do,' I said.

'Work to do? Of course they've got work to do. But Louise comes first—she sees to that all right.'

'No,' I said to myself. 'You *don't* like her.'

'All the same,' went on Miss Reilly, 'I don't see what she wants with a professional hospital nurse. I should have thought amateur assistance was more in her line; not some one who'll jam a thermometer in her mouth, and count her pulse and bring everything down to hard facts.'

Well, I must admit it, I was curious.

'You think there's nothing the matter with her?' I asked.

'Of course there's nothing the matter with her! The woman's as strong as an ox. "Dear Louise hasn't slept." "She's got black circles under her eyes." Yes—put there with a blue pencil! Anything to get attention, to have everybody hovering round her, making a fuss of her!'

There was something in that, of course. I had (what nurse hasn't?) come across many cases of hypochondriacs whose delight it is to keep a whole household dancing attendance. And if a doctor or a nurse were to say to them 'there's nothing on earth the matter with you!' Well, to begin with they wouldn't believe it, and their indignation would be as genuine as indignation can be.

Of course it was quite possible that Mrs. Leidner might be a case of this kind. The husband, naturally, would be the first to be deceived. Husbands, I've found, are a credulous lot where illness is concerned. But all the same, it didn't quite square with what I'd heard. It didn't, for instance, fit in with that word 'safer.'

Funny how that word had got kind of stuck in my mind.

Reflecting on it, I asked:

'Is Mrs. Leidner a nervous woman? Is she nervous, for instance, of living out far from anywhere?'

'What is there to be nervous of? Good heavens, there are ten of them! And they've got guards too—because of the antiquities. Oh no, she's not nervous—at least——'

She seemed struck by some thought and stopped—going on slowly after a minute or two.

'It's odd your saying that.'

'Why?'

'Flight-Lieutenant Jervis and I rode over the other day. It was in the morning. Most of them were up on the dig. She was sitting writing a letter and I suppose she didn't hear us coming. The boy who brings you in wasn't about for once, and we came straight up on to the verandah. Apparently she saw Flight-Lieutenant Jervis's shadow thrown on the wall—and she fairly screamed! Apologised, of course. Said she thought it was a strange man. A bit odd, that. I mean, even if it was a strange man, why get the wind up?'

I nodded thoughtfully.

Miss Reilly was silent, then burst out suddenly.

'I don't know what's the matter with them there this year. They've all got the jumps. Johnson goes about so glum she can't open her mouth. David never speaks if he can help it. Bill, of course, never stops, and somehow his chatter seems to make the others worse. Carey goes about looking as though something would snap any minute. And they all watch each other as though—as though——Oh, I don't know, but it's *queer*.'

It was odd, I thought, that two such dissimilar people as Miss Reilly and Major Pennyman should have been struck in the same manner.

Just then Mr. Coleman came bustling in. Bustling was just the word for it. If his tongue had hung out and he had suddenly produced a tail to wag you wouldn't have been surprised.

'Hallo-allo,' he said. 'Absolutely the world's best shopper—that's me. Have you shown nurse all the beauties of the town?'

'She wasn't impressed,' said Miss Reilly dryly.

'I don't blame her,' said Mr. Coleman heartily. 'Of all the one-horse tumble-down places!'

'Not a lover of the picturesque or the antique, are you, Bill? I can't think why you are an archaeologist.'

'Don't blame me for that. Blame my guardian. He's a learned bird—fellow of his college—browses among books in bedroom slippers—that kind of man. Bit of a shock for him to have a ward like me.'

'I think it's frightfully stupid of you to be forced into a profession you don't care for,' said the girl sharply.

'Not forced, Sheila, old girl, not forced. The old man asked if I had any special profession in mind, and I said I hadn't, and so he wangled a season out here for me.'

'But haven't you any idea really what you'd *like* to do? You *must* have!'

'Of course I have. My idea would be to give work a miss altogether. What I'd like to do is to have plenty of money and go in for motor-racing.'

'You're absurd!' said Miss Reilly.

She sounded quite angry.

'Oh, I realise that it's quite out of the question,' said Mr. Coleman cheerfully. 'So, if I've got to do something, I don't much care what it is so long as it isn't mugging in an office all day long. I was quite agreeable to seeing a bit of the world. Here goes, I said, and along I came.'

'And a fat lot of use you must be, I expect!'

'There you're wrong. I can stand up on the dig and shout "*Y'Allah*" with anybody! And as a matter of fact I'm not so dusty at drawing. Imitating handwriting used to be my speciality at school. I'd have made a first-class forger. Oh, well, I may come to that yet. If my Rolls-Royce splashes you with mud as you're waiting for a bus, you'll know that I've taken to crime.'

Miss Reilly said coldly:

'Don't you think it's about time you started instead of talking so much?'

'Hospitable, aren't we, nurse?'

'I'm sure Nurse Leatheran is anxious to get settled in.'

'You're always sure of everything,' retorted Mr. Coleman with a grin.

That was true enough, I thought. Cock-sure little minx.

I said dryly:

‘Perhaps we’d better start, Mr. Coleman.’

‘Right you are, nurse.’

I shook hands with Miss Reilly and thanked her, and we set off.

‘Damned attractive girl, Sheila,’ said Mr. Coleman. ‘But always ticking a fellow off.’

We drove out of the town and presently took a kind of track between green crops. It was very bumpy and full of ruts.

After about half an hour Mr. Coleman pointed to a big mound by the river bank ahead of us and said:

‘Tell Yarimjah.’

I could see little black figures moving about it like ants.

As I was looking they suddenly began to run all together down the side of the mound.

‘Fidos,’ said Mr. Coleman. ‘Knocking-off-time. We knock off an hour before sunset.’

The expedition house lay a little way back from the river.

The driver rounded a corner, bumped through an extremely narrow arch and there we were.

The house was built round a courtyard. Originally it had occupied only the south side of the courtyard with a few unimportant out-buildings on the east. The expedition had continued the building on the other two sides. As the plan of the house was to prove of special interest later, I append a rough sketch of it here.

All the rooms opened on to the courtyard, and most of the windows—the exception being in the original south building where there were windows giving on the outside country as well. These windows, however, were barred on the outside. In the south-west corner a staircase ran up to a long flat roof with a parapet running the length of the south side of the building which was higher than the other three sides.

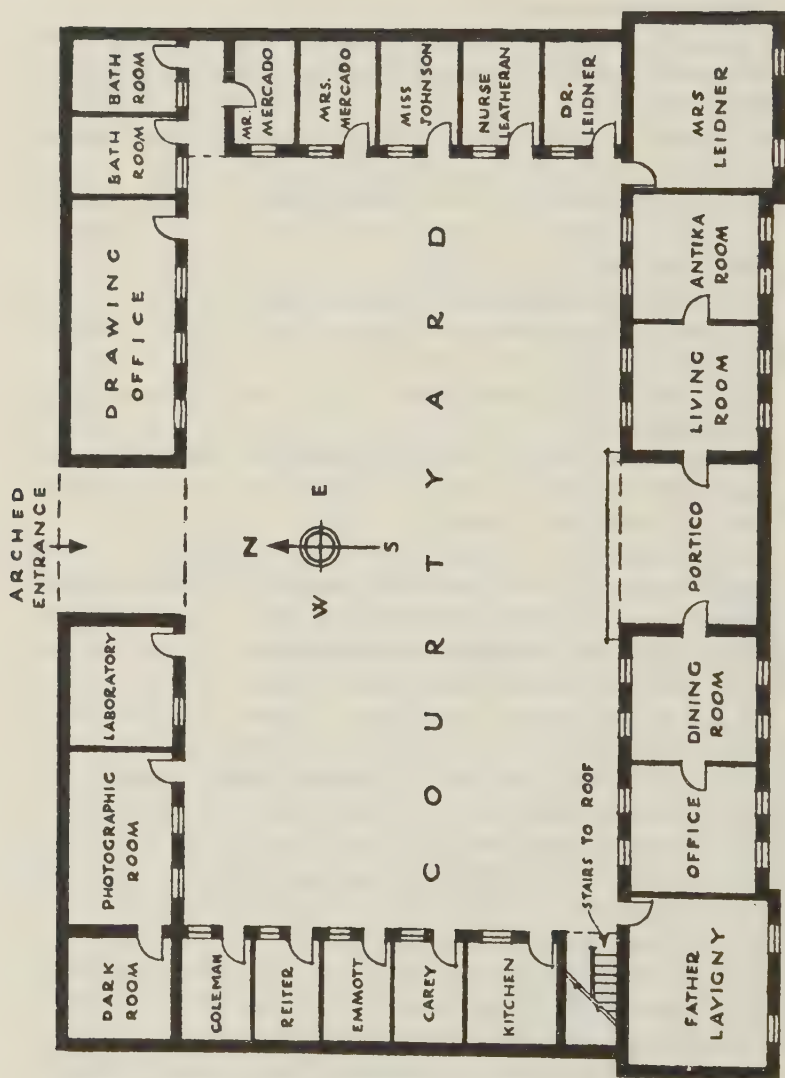
Mr. Coleman led me along the east side of the courtyard and round to where a big open verandah occupied the centre of the south side. He pushed open a door at one side of it and we entered a room where several people were sitting round a tea-table.

‘Toodle-oodle-oo!’ said Mr. Coleman. ‘Here’s Sairey Gamp.’

The lady who was sitting at the head of the table rose and came to greet me.

I had my first glimpse of Louise Leidner.

MURDER IN MESOPOTAMIA



PLAN OF THE EXPEDITION HOUSE
AT TELL YARIMJAH

CHAPTER V

TELL YARIMJAH

I DON'T MIND admitting that my first impression on seeing Mrs. Leidner was one of downright surprise. One gets into the way of imagining a person when one hears them talked about. I'd got it firmly into my head that Mrs. Leidner was a dark, discontented kind of woman. The nervy kind, all on edge. And then, too, I'd expected her to be—well, to put it frankly—a bit vulgar.

She wasn't a bit like what I'd imagined her! To begin with, she was very fair. She wasn't a Swede, like her husband, but she might have been as far as looks went. She had that blonde Scandinavian fairness that you don't very often see. She wasn't a young woman. Midway between thirty and forty, I should say. Her face was rather haggard, and there was some grey hair mingled with the fairness. Her eyes, though, were lovely. They were the only eyes I've ever come across that you might truly describe as violet. They were very large, and there were faint shadows underneath them. She was very thin and fragile-looking, and if I say that she had an air of intense weariness and was at the same time very much alive, it sounds like nonsense—but that's the feeling I got. I felt, too, that she was a lady through and through. And that means something—even nowadays.

She put out her hand and smiled. Her voice was low and soft with an American drawl in it. 'I'm so glad you've come, nurse. Will you have some tea? Or would you like to go to your room first?'

I said I'd have tea, and she introduced me to the people sitting round the table.

'This is Miss Johnson—and Mr. Reiter. Mrs. Mercado. Mr. Emmott. Father Lavigny. My husband will be in presently. Sit down here between Father Lavigny and Miss Johnson.'

I did as I was bid and Miss Johnson began talking to me, asking about my journey and so on.

I liked her. She reminded me of a matron I'd had in my probationer days whom we had all admired and worked hard for.

She was getting on for fifty, I should judge, and rather mannish in appearance, with iron-grey hair cropped short. She had an abrupt, pleasant voice, rather deep in tone. She had an ugly rugged face with an almost laughably turned-up nose which she was in the habit of rubbing irritably when anything troubled or perplexed her. She

wore a tweed coat and skirt made rather like a man's. She told me presently that she was a native of Yorkshire.

Father Lavigny I found just a bit alarming. He was a tall man with a great black beard and pince-nez. I had heard Mrs. Kelsey say that there was a French monk there, and I now saw that Father Lavigny was wearing a monk's robe of some white woollen material. It surprised me rather, because I always understood that monks went into monasteries and didn't come out again.

Mrs. Leidner talked to him mostly in French, but he spoke to me in quite fair English. I noticed that he had shrewd, observant eyes which darted about from face to face.

Opposite me were the other three. Mr. Reiter was a stout, fair young man with glasses. His hair was rather long and curly, and he had very round blue eyes. I should think he must have been a lovely baby, but he wasn't much to look at now! In fact he was just a little like a pig. The other young man had very short hair cropped close to his head. He had a long, rather humorous face and very good teeth, and he looked very attractive when he smiled. He said very little, though, just nodded if spoken to or answered in monosyllables. He, like Mr. Reiter, was an American. The last person was Mrs. Mercado, and I couldn't have a good look at her because whenever I glanced in her direction I always found her staring at me with a kind of hungry stare that was a bit disconcerting to say the least of it. You might have thought a hospital nurse was a strange animal the way she was looking at me. No manners at all!

She was quite young—not more than about twenty-five—and sort of dark and slinky-looking, if you know what I mean. Quite nice-looking in a kind of way, but rather as though she might have what my mother used to call 'a touch of the tarbrush.' She had on a very vivid pullover and her nails matched it in colour. She had a thin bird-like eager face with big eyes and rather a tight, suspicious mouth.

The tea was very good—a nice strong blend—not like the weak China stuff that Mrs. Kelsey always had and that had been a sore trial to me.

There was toast and jam and a plate of rock buns and a cutting cake. Mr. Emmott was very polite passing me things. Quiet as he was he always seemed to notice when my plate was empty.

Presently Mr. Coleman bustled in and took the place beyond Miss Johnson. There didn't seem to be anything the matter with *his* nerves. He talked away nineteen to the dozen.

Mrs. Leidner sighed once and cast a wearied look in his direction but it didn't have any effect. Nor did the fact that Mrs. Mercado, to whom he was addressing most of his conversation, was far too busy watching me to do more than make perfunctory replies.

Just as we were finishing, Dr. Leidner and Mr. Mercado came in from the dig.

Dr. Leidner greeted me in his nice kind manner. I saw his eyes go quickly and anxiously to his wife's face and he seemed to be relieved by what he saw there. Then he sat down at the other end of the table and Mr. Mercado sat down in the vacant place by Mrs. Leidner. He was a tall, thin, melancholy man, a good deal older than his wife, with a sallow complexion and a queer, soft, shapeless-looking beard. I was glad when he came in, for his wife stopped staring at me and transferred her attention to him, watching him with a kind of anxious impatience that I found rather odd. He himself stirred his tea dreamily and said nothing at all. A piece of cake lay untasted on his plate.

There was still one vacant place, and presently the door opened and a man came in.

The moment I saw Richard Carey I felt he was one of the handsomest men I'd seen for a long time—and yet I doubt if that were really so. To say a man is handsome and at the same time to say he looks like a death's head sounds a rank contradiction, and yet it was true. His head gave the effect of having the skin stretched unusually tightly over the bones—but they were beautiful bones. The lean line of jaw and temple and forehead was so sharply outlined that he reminded me of a bronze statue. Out of this lean brown face looked two of the brightest and most intensely blue eyes I have ever seen. He stood about six foot and was, I should imagine, a little under forty years of age.

Dr. Leidner said:

'This is Mr. Carey, our architect, nurse.'

He murmured something in a pleasant, inaudible English voice and sat down by Mrs. Mercado.

Mrs. Leidner said:

'I'm afraid the tea is a little cold, Mr. Carey.'

He said: 'Oh, that's quite all right, Mrs. Leidner. My fault for being late. I wanted to finish plotting those walls.'

Mrs. Mercado said, 'Jam, Mr. Carey?'

Mr. Reiter pushed forward the toast.

And I remember Major Pennyman saying:

'I can explain best what I mean by saying that they all passed the butter to each other a shade too politely.'

Yes, there was something a little odd about it. . . .

A shade formal. . . .

You'd have said it was a party of strangers—not people who had known each other—some of them—for quite a number of years.

CHAPTER VI

FIRST EVENING

AFTER TEA Mrs. Leidner took me to show me my room.

Perhaps here I had better give a short description of the arrangement of the rooms. This was very simple and can easily be understood by a reference to the plan.

On either side of the big open porch were doors leading into the two principal rooms. That on the right led into the dining-room, where we had had tea. The one on the other side led into an exactly similar room (I have called it the living-room) which was used as a sitting-room and kind of informal workroom—that is, a certain amount of drawing (other than the strictly architectural) was done there, and the more delicate pieces of pottery were brought there to be pieced together. Through the living-room one passed into the antiquities-room where all the finds from the dig were brought in and stored on shelves and in pigeon-holes, and also laid out on big benches and tables. From the antika-room there was no exit save through the living-room.

Beyond the antika-room, but reached through a door which gave on the courtyard, was Mrs. Leidner's bedroom. This, like the other rooms on that side of the house, had a couple of barred windows looking out over the ploughed countryside. Round the corner next to Mrs. Leidner's room, but with no actual communicating door, was Dr. Leidner's room. This was the first of the rooms on the east side of the building. Next to it was the room that was to be mine. Next to me was Miss Johnson's, with Mr. and Mrs. Mercado's beyond. After that came two so-called bathrooms.

(When I once used that last term in the hearing of Dr. Reilly he laughed at me and said a bathroom was either a bathroom or not a

bathroom! All the same, when you've got used to taps and proper plumbing, it seems strange to call a couple of mud-rooms with a tin hip-bath in each of them, and muddy water brought in kerosene tins, *bathrooms*!)

All this side of the building had been added by Dr. Leidner to the original Arab house. The bedrooms were all the same, each with a window and a door giving on to the courtyard.

Along the north side were the drawing office, the laboratory and the photographic rooms.

To return to the verandah, the arrangement of rooms was much the same on the other side. There was the dining-room leading into the office where the files were kept and the cataloguing and typing was done. Corresponding to Mrs. Leidner's room was that of Father Lavigny, who was given the largest bedroom; he used it also for the decoding—or whatever you call it—of tablets.

In the south-west corner was the staircase running up to the roof. On the west side were first the kitchen quarters and then four small bedrooms used by the young men—Carey, Emmott, Reiter and Coleman.

At the north-west corner was the photographic-room with the dark-room leading out of it. Next to that the laboratory. Then came the only entrance—the big arched doorway through which we had entered. Outside were sleeping quarters for the native servants, the guard-house for the soldiers, and stables, etc., for the water horses. The drawing-office was to the right of the archway occupying the rest of the north side.

I have gone into the arrangements of the house rather fully here because I don't want to have to go over them again later.

As I say, Mrs. Leidner herself took me round the building and finally established me in my bedroom, hoping that I should be comfortable and have everything I wanted.

The room was nicely though plainly furnished—a bed, a chest of drawers, a wash-stand and a chair.

'The boys will bring you hot water before lunch and dinner—and in the morning, of course. If you want it any other time, go outside and clap your hands, and when the boy comes say, *jib mai'har*. Do you think you can remember that?'

I said I thought so and repeated it a little haltingly.

'That's right. And be sure and shout it. Arabs don't understand anything said in an ordinary "English" voice.'

'Languages are funny things,' I said. 'It seems odd there should be such a lot of different ones.'

Mrs. Leidner smiled.

'There is a church in Palestine in which the Lord's Prayer is written up in—ninety, I think it is—different languages.'

'Well!' I said, 'I must write and tell my old aunt that. She *will* be interested.'

Mrs. Leidner fingered the jug and basin absently and shifted the soap-dish an inch or two.

'I do hope you'll be happy here,' she said. 'And not get too bored.'

'I'm not often bored,' I assured her. 'Life's not long enough for that.'

She did not answer. She continued to toy with the wash-stand as though abstractedly.

Suddenly she fixed her dark violet eyes on my face.

'What exactly did my husband tell you, nurse?'

Well, one usually says the same thing to a question of that kind.

'I gathered you were a bit run-down and all that, Mrs. Leidner,' I said glibly. 'And that you just wanted some one to look after you and take any worries off your hands.'

She bent her head slowly and thoughtfully.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes—that will do very well.'

That was just a little bit enigmatic, but I wasn't going to question it. Instead I said:

'I hope you'll let me help you with anything there is to do in the house. You mustn't let me be idle.'

She smiled a little.

'Thank you, nurse.'

Then she sat down on the bed and, rather to my surprise, began to cross-question me rather closely. I say rather to my surprise because, from the moment I set eyes on her, I felt sure that Mrs. Leidner was a lady. And a lady, in my experience, very seldom displays curiosity about one's private affairs.

But Mrs. Leidner seemed anxious to know everything there was to know about me. Where I'd trained and how long ago. What had brought me out to the East. How it had come about that Dr. Reilly had recommended me. She even asked me if I had ever been in America or had any relations in America. One or two other questions she asked me that seemed quite purposeless at the time, but of which I saw the significance later.

Then, suddenly, her manner changed. She smiled—a warm sunny smile—and she said, very sweetly, that she was very glad I had come and that she was sure I was going to be a comfort to her.

She got up from the bed and said:

‘Would you like to come up to the roof and see the sunset? It’s usually very lovely about this time.’

I agreed willingly.

As we went out of the room she asked:

‘Were there many other people on the train from Baghdad? Any men?’

I said that I hadn’t noticed anybody in particular. There had been two Frenchmen in the restaurant-car the night before. And a party of three men whom I gathered from their conversation had to do with the Pipe line.

She nodded and a faint sound escaped her. It sounded like a small sigh of relief.

We went up to the roof together.

Mrs. Mercado was there, sitting on the parapet, and Dr. Leidner was bending over looking at a lot of stones and broken pottery that were laid out in rows. There were big things he called querns, and pestles and celts and stone axes, and more broken bits of pottery with queer patterns on them than I’ve ever seen all at once.

‘Come over here,’ called out Mrs. Mercado, ‘Isn’t it *too* too beautiful?’

It certainly was a beautiful sunset. Hassanieh in the distance looked quite fairy-like with the setting sun behind it, and the River Tigris flowing between its wide banks looked like a dream river rather than a real one.

‘Isn’t it lovely, Eric?’ said Mrs. Leidner.

The doctor looked up with abstracted eyes, murmured, ‘Lovely, lovely,’ perfunctorily and went on sorting potsherds.

Mrs. Leidner smiled and said:

‘Archaeologists only look at what lies beneath their feet. The sky and the heavens don’t exist for them.

Mrs. Mercado giggled.

‘Oh, they’re very queer people—you’ll soon find *that* out, nurse,’ she said.

She paused and then added:

‘We are all *so* glad you’ve come. We’ve been so very worried about our dear Mrs. Leidner, haven’t we, Louise?’

'Have you?'

Her voice was not encouraging.

'Oh, yes. She really has been *very* bad, nurse. All sorts of alarms and excursions. You know when anybody says to me of some one, "It's just nerves," I always say: but what could be *worse*? Nerves are the core and centre of one's being, aren't they?'

'Puss, puss,' I thought to myself.

Mrs. Leidner said dryly:

'Well, you needn't be worried about me any more, Marie. Nurse is going to look after me.'

'Certainly I am,' I said cheerfully.

'I'm sure that will make all the difference,' said Mrs. Mercado. 'We've all felt that she ought to see a doctor or do *something*. Her nerves have really been all to pieces, haven't they, Louise dear?'

'So much so that I seem to have got on *your* nerves with them,' said Mrs. Leidner. 'Shall we talk about something more interesting than my wretched ailments?'

I understood then that Mrs. Leidner was the sort of woman who could easily make enemies. There was a cool rudeness in her tone (not that I blamed her for it) which brought a flush to Mrs. Mercado's rather sallow cheeks. She stammered out something, but Mrs. Leidner had risen and had joined her husband at the other end of the roof. I doubt if he heard her coming till she laid her hand on his shoulder, then he looked up quickly. There was affection and a kind of eager questioning in his face.

Mrs. Leidner nodded her head gently. Presently, her arm through his, they wandered to the far parapet and finally down the steps together.

'He's devoted to her, isn't he?' said Mrs. Mercado.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's very nice to see.'

She was looking at me with a queer, rather eager sidelong glance.

'What do you think is really the matter with her, nurse?' she asked, lowering her voice a little.

'Oh, I don't suppose it's much,' I said cheerfully. 'Just a bit run-down, I expect.'

Her eyes still bored into me as they had done at tea. She said abruptly:

'Are you a mental nurse?'

'Oh, dear no!' I said. 'What made you think that?'

She was silent for a moment, then she said:

'Do you know how queer she's been? Did Dr. Leidner tell you?'

I don't hold with gossiping about my cases. On the other hand, it's my experience that it's often very hard to get the truth out of the relatives, and until you know the truth you're often working in the dark and doing no good. Of course, when there's a doctor in charge, it's different. He tells you what it's necessary for you to know. But in this case there wasn't a doctor in charge. Dr. Reilly had never been called in professionally. And in my own mind I wasn't at all sure that Dr. Leidner had told me all he could have done. It's often the husband's instinct to be reticent—and more honour to him, I say. But all the same, the more I knew the better I could tell which line to take. Mrs. Mercado (whom I put down in my own mind as a thoroughly spiteful little cat) was clearly dying to talk. And frankly, on the human side as well as the professional, I wanted to hear what she had to say. You can put it that I was just every-day curious if you like.

I said, 'I gather Mrs. Leidner's not been quite her normal self lately?'

Mrs. Mercado laughed disagreeably.

'Normal? I should say not. Frightening us to death. One night it was fingers tapping on her window. And then it was a hand without an arm attached. But when it came to a yellow face pressed against the window—and when she rushed to the window there was nothing there—well, I ask you, it is a bit creepy for all of us.'

'Perhaps somebody was playing a trick on her,' I suggested.

'Oh, no, she fancied it all. And only three days ago at dinner they were firing off shots in the village—nearly a mile away—and she jumped up and screamed out—it scared us all to death. As for Dr. Leidner, he rushed to her and behaved in the most ridiculous way. "It's nothing, darling, it's nothing at all," he kept saying. I think, you know, nurse, men sometimes *encourage* women in these hysterical fancies. It's a pity because it's a bad thing. Delusions shouldn't be encouraged.'

'Not if they *are* delusions,' I said dryly.

'What else could they be?'

I didn't answer because I didn't know what to say. It was a funny business. The shots and the screaming were natural enough—for any one in a nervous condition, that is. But this queer story of a spectral face and hand was different. It looked to me like one of two things—either Mrs. Leidner had made the story up (exactly as a child shows off by telling lies about something that never happened in order to

make herself the centre of attraction) or else it was, as I had suggested, a deliberate practical joke. It was the sort of thing, I reflected, that an unimaginative hearty sort of young fellow like Mr. Coleman might think very funny. I decided to keep a close watch on him. Nervous patients can be scared nearly out of their minds by a silly joke.

Mrs. Mercado said with a sideways glance at me.

'She's very romantic-looking, nurse, don't you think so? The sort of woman things *happen* to.'

'Have many things happened to her?' I asked.

'Well, her first husband was killed in the war when she was only twenty. I think that's very pathetic and romantic, don't you?'

'It's one way of calling a goose a swan,' I said dryly.

'Oh, nurse! What an extraordinary remark!'

It was really a very true one. The amount of women you hear say 'If Donald—or Arthur—or whatever his name was—had *only* lived.' And I sometimes think but if he had, he'd have been a stout, unromantic, short-tempered, middle-aged husband as likely as not.

It was getting dark and I suggested that we should go down. Mrs. Mercado agreed and asked if I would like to see the laboratory. 'My husband will be there—working.'

I said I would like to very much and we made our way there. The place was lighted by a lamp but it was empty. Mrs. Mercado showed me some of the apparatus and some copper ornaments that were being treated, and also some bones coated with wax.

'Where can Joseph be?' said Mrs. Mercado.

She looked into the drawing-office, where Carey was at work. He hardly looked up as we entered, and I was struck by the extraordinary look of strain on his face. It came to me suddenly: 'This man is at the end of his tether. Very soon, something will snap.' And I remembered somebody else had noticed that same tenseness about him.

As we went out again I turned my head for one last look at him. He was bent over his paper, his lips pressed very closely together, and that 'death's head' suggestion of his bones very strongly marked. Perhaps it was fanciful, but I thought that he looked like a knight of old who was going into battle and knew he was going to be killed.

And again I felt what an extraordinary and quite unconscious power of attraction he had.

We found Mr. Mercado in the living-room. He was explaining the idea of some new process to Mrs. Leidner. She was sitting on a straight wooden chair, embroidering flowers in fine silks, and I was

struck anew by her strange, fragile, unearthly appearance. She looked a fairy creature more than flesh and blood.

Mrs. Mercado said, her voice high and shrill:

'Oh, *there* you are, Joseph. We thought we'd find you in the lab.'

He jumped up looking startled and confused, as though her entrance had broken a spell. He said stammeringly:

'I—I must go now. I'm in the middle of—the middle of——'

He didn't complete the sentence but turned towards the door.

Mrs. Leidner said in her soft, drawling voice:

'You must finish telling me some other time. It was very interesting.'

She looked up at us, smiled rather sweetly but in a far-away manner, and bent over her embroidery again.

In a minute or two she said:

'There are some books over there, nurse. We've got quite a good selection. Choose one and sit down.'

I went over to the bookshelf. Mrs. Mercado stayed for a minute or two, then, turning abruptly, she went out. As she passed me I saw her face and I didn't like the look of it. She looked wild with fury.

In spite of myself I remembered some of the things Mrs. Kelsey had said and hinted about Mrs. Leidner. I didn't like to think they were true because I liked Mrs. Leidner, but I wondered, nevertheless, if there mightn't perhaps be a grain of truth behind them.

I didn't think it was all her fault, but the fact remained that dear ugly Miss Johnson, and that common little spitfire Mrs. Mercado, couldn't hold a candle to her in looks or in attraction. And after all, men are men all over the world. You soon see a lot of that in my profession.

Mercado was a poor fish, and I don't suppose Mrs. Leidner really cared two hoots for his admiration—but his wife cared. If I wasn't mistaken, she minded badly and would be quite willing to do Mrs. Leidner a bad turn if she could.

I looked at Mrs. Leidner sitting there and sewing at her pretty flowers, so remote and far away and aloof. I felt somehow I ought to warn her. I felt that perhaps she didn't know how stupid and un-reasoning and violent jealousy and hate can be—and how little it takes to set them smouldering.

And then I said to myself, 'Amy Leatheran, you're a fool. Mrs. Leidner's no chicken. She's close on forty if she's a day, and she must know all about life there is to know.'

But I felt that all the same perhaps she didn't.

She had such a queer untouched look.

I began to wonder what her life had been. I knew she'd only married Dr. Leidner two years ago. And according to Mrs. Mercado her first husband had died nearly twenty years ago.

I came and sat down near her with a book, and presently I went and washed my hands for supper. It was a good meal—some really excellent curry. They all went to bed early and I was glad for I was tired.

Dr. Leidner came with me to my room to see I had all I wanted.

He gave me a warm handclasp and said eagerly:

'She likes you, nurse. She's taken to you at once. I'm so glad. I feel everything's going to be all right now.'

His eagerness was almost boyish.

I felt, too, that Mrs. Leidner had taken a liking to me, and I was pleased it should be so.

But I didn't quite share his confidence. I felt, somehow, that there was more to it all than he himself might know.

There was *something*—something I couldn't get at. But I felt it in the air.

My bed was comfortable, but I didn't sleep well for all that. I dreamt too much.

The words of a poem by Keats, that I'd had to learn as a child, kept running through my head. I kept getting them wrong and it worried me. It was a poem I'd always hated—I suppose because I'd had to learn it whether I wanted to or not. But somehow when I woke up in the dark I saw a sort of beauty in it for the first time.

'*Oh say what ails thee, knight at arms, alone—and (what was it?)—palely loitering . . . ?* I saw the knight's face in my mind for the first time—and it was Mr. Carey's face—a grim, tense, bronzed face like some of those poor young men I remembered as a girl during the war . . . and I felt sorry for him—and then I fell off to sleep again and I saw that the Belle Dame sans Merci was Mrs. Leidner and she was leaning sideways on a horse with an embroidery of flowers in her hands—and then the horse stumbled and everywhere there were bones coated in wax, and I woke up all goose-flesh and shivering, and told myself that curry never *had* agreed with me at night.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN AT THE WINDOW

I THINK I'D BETTER make it clear right away that there isn't going to be any local colour in this story. I don't know anything about archaeology and I don't know that I very much want to. Messing about with people and places that are buried and done with doesn't make sense to me. Mr. Carey used to tell me that I hadn't got the archaeological temperament and I've no doubt he was quite right.

The very first morning after my arrival Mr. Carey asked if I'd like to come and see the palace he was—*planning* I think he called it. Though how you can plan for a thing that's happened long ago I'm sure I don't know! Well, I said I'd like to, and to tell the truth, I was a bit excited about it. Nearly three thousand years old that palace was, it appeared. I wondered what sort of palaces they had in those days, and if it would be like the pictures I'd seen of Tutankamen's tomb furniture. But would you believe it, there was nothing to see but *mud*! Dirty mud walls about two feet high—and that's all there was to it. Mr. Carey took me here and there telling me things—how this was the great court, and there were some chambers here and an upper storey and various other rooms that opened off the central court. And all I thought was, 'But how does he *know*?' though, of course, I was too polite to say so. I can tell you it *was* a disappointment! The whole excavation looked like nothing but mud to me—no marble or gold or anything handsome—my aunt's house in Cricklewood would have made a much more imposing ruin! And those old Assyrians or whatever they were, called themselves *kings*. When Mr. Carey had shown me his old 'palace,' he handed me over to Father Lavigny, who showed me the rest of the mound. I was a little afraid of Father Lavigny, being a monk and a foreigner and having such a deep voice and all, but he was very kind—though rather vague. Sometimes I felt it wasn't much more real to him than it was to me.

Mrs. Leidner explained that later. She said that Father Lavigny was only interested in 'written documents'—as she called them. They wrote everything on clay, these people, queer heathenish-looking marks too, but quite sensible. There were even school tablets—the teacher's lesson on one side and the pupil's effort on the back of it. I confess that that did interest me rather—it seemed so human, if you know what I mean.

Father Lavigny walked round the work with me and showed me what were temples or palaces and what were private houses, and also a place which he said was an early Akkadian cemetery. He spoke in a funny jerky way, just throwing in a scrap of information and then reverting to other subjects.

He said:

'It is strange that you have come here. Is Mrs. Leidner really ill, then?'

'Not exactly ill,' I said cautiously.

'She is an odd woman. A dangerous woman, I think.'

'Now what do you mean by that?' I said. 'Dangerous? How dangerous?'

He shook his head thoughtfully.

'I think she is ruthless,' he said. 'Yes, I think she could be absolutely ruthless.'

'If you'll excuse me,' I said, 'I think you're talking nonsense.'

He shook his head.

'You do not know women as I do,' he said.

And that was a funny thing, I thought, for a monk to say. But of course I suppose he might have heard a lot of things in confession. But that rather puzzled me, because I wasn't sure if monks heard confessions or if it was only priests. I supposed he *was* a monk with that long woollen robe—all sweeping up the dirt—and the rosary and all!

'Yes, she could be ruthless,' he said musingly. 'I am quite sure of that. And yet—though she is so hard—like stone, like marble—yet she is afraid. What is she afraid of?'

That, I thought, is what we should all like to know!

At least it was possible that her husband did know, but I didn't think any one else did.

He fixed me with a sudden bright, dark eye.

'It is odd here? You find it odd? Or quite natural?'

'Not quite natural,' I said, considering. 'It's comfortable enough as far as the arrangements go—but there isn't quite a comfortable feeling.'

'It makes *me* uncomfortable. I have the idea,' he became suddenly a little more foreign—'that something prepares itself. Dr. Leidner, too, he is not quite himself. Something is worrying him also.'

'His wife's health?'

'That perhaps. But there is more. There is—how shall I say it—an uneasiness.'

And that was just it, there was an uneasiness.

We didn't say any more just then, for Dr. Leidner came towards us. He showed me a child's grave that had just been uncovered. Rather pathetic it was—the little bones—and a pot or two and some little specks that Dr. Leidner told me were a bead necklace.

It was the workmen that made me laugh. You never saw such a lot of scarecrows—all in long petticoats and rags, and their heads tied up as though they had toothache. And every now and then, as they went to and fro carrying away baskets of earth, they began to sing—at least I suppose it was meant to be singing—a queer sort of monotonous chant that went on and on over and over again. I noticed that most of their eyes were terrible—all covered with discharge, and one or two looked half blind. I was just thinking what a miserable lot they were when Dr. Leidner said, 'Rather a fine-looking lot of men, aren't they?' and I thought what a queer world it was and how two different people could see the same thing each of them the other way round. I haven't put that very well, but you can guess what I mean.

After a bit Dr. Leidner said he was going back to the house for a mid-morning cup of tea. So he and I walked back together and he told me things. When *he* explained, it was all quite different. I sort of *saw* it all—how it used to be—the streets and the houses, and he showed me ovens where they baked bread and said the Arabs used much the same kind of ovens nowadays.

We got back to the house and found Mrs. Leidner had got up. She was looking better to-day, not so thin and worn. Tea came in almost at once and Dr. Leidner told her what had turned up during the morning on the dig. Then he went back to work and Mrs. Leidner asked me if I would like to see some of the finds they had made up to date. Of course I said 'Yes,' so she took me through into the antika-room. There was a lot of stuff lying about—mostly broken pots it seemed to me—or else ones that were all mended and stuck together. The whole lot might have been thrown away, I thought.

'Dear, dear,' I said, 'it's a pity they're all so broken, isn't it? Are they really worth keeping?'

Mrs. Leidner smiled a little and she said:

'You mustn't let Eric hear you. Pots interest him more than anything else, and some of these are the oldest things we have—perhaps as much as seven thousand years old.' And she explained how some of them came from a very deep cut on the mound down towards the

bottom, and how, thousands of years ago, they had been broken and mended with bitumen, showing people prized their things just as much then as they do nowadays.

'And now,' she said, 'we'll show you something more exciting.'

And she took down a box from the shelf and showed me a beautiful gold dagger with dark-blue stones in the handle.

I exclaimed with pleasure.

Mrs. Leidner laughed.

'Yes, everybody likes gold! Except my husband.'

'Why doesn't Dr. Leidner like it?'

'Well, for one thing it comes expensive. You have to pay the workmen who find it the weight of the object in gold.'

'Good gracious!' I exclaimed. 'But why?'

'Oh, it's a custom. For one thing it prevents them from stealing. You see, if they *did* steal it wouldn't be for the archaeological value but for the intrinsic value. They could melt it down. So we make it easy for them to be honest.'

She took down another tray and showed me a really beautiful gold drinking-cup with a design of rams' heads on it.

Again I exclaimed.

'Yes, it is beautiful, isn't it? These came from a prince's grave. We found other royal graves but most of them had been plundered. This cup is our best find. It is one of the most lovely ever found anywhere. Early Akkadian. Unique.'

Suddenly, with a frown, Mrs. Leidner brought the cup up close to her eyes and scratched at it delicately with her nail.

'How extraordinary! There's actually wax on it. Some one must have been in here with a candle.'

She detached the little flake and replaced the cup in its place.

After that she showed me some queer little terra-cotta figurines—but most of them were just rude. Nasty minds those old people had, I say.

When we went back to the porch Mrs. Mercado was sitting polishing her nails. She was holding them out in front of her admiring the effect. I thought myself that anything more hideous than that orange red could hardly have been imagined.

Mrs. Leidner had brought with her from the antika-room a very delicate little saucer broken in several pieces, and this she now proceeded to join together. I watched her for a minute or two and then asked if I could help.

'Oh yes, there are plenty more.' She fetched quite a supply of broken pottery and we set to work. I soon got into the hang of it and she praised my ability. I suppose most nurses are handy with their fingers.

'How busy everybody is,' said Mrs. Mercado. 'It makes me feel dreadfully idle. Of course I *am* idle.'

'Why shouldn't you be if you like?' said Mrs. Leidner.

Her voice was quite uninterested.

At twelve we had lunch. Afterwards Dr. Leidner and Mr. Mercado cleaned some pottery, pouring a solution of hydrochloric acid over it. One pot went a lovely plum colour and a pattern of bulls' horns came out on another one. It was really quite magical. All the dried mud that no washing would remove sort of foamed and boiled away.

Mr. Carey and Mr. Coleman went out on the dig and Mr. Reiter went off to the photographic room.

'What will you do, Louise?' Dr. Leidner asked his wife. 'I suppose you'll rest for a bit?'

I gathered that Mrs. Leidner usually lay down every afternoon.

'I'll rest for about an hour. Then perhaps I'll go out for a short stroll.'

'Good. Nurse will go with you, won't you?'

'Of course,' I said.

'No, no,' said Mrs. Leidner. 'I like going alone. Nurse isn't to feel so much on duty that I'm not allowed out of her sight.'

'Oh, but I'd like to come,' I said.

'No, really, I'd rather you didn't.' She was quite firm—almost peremptory. 'I must be by myself every now and then. It's necessary to me.'

I didn't insist, of course. But as I went off for a short sleep myself it struck me as odd that Mrs. Leidner, with her nervous terrors, should be quite content to walk by herself without any kind of protection.

When I came out of my room at half-past three the courtyard was deserted save for a little boy with a large copper bath who was washing pottery, and Mr. Emmott, who was sorting and arranging it. As I went towards them Mrs. Leidner came in through the archway. She looked more alive than I had seen her yet. Her eyes shone and she looked uplifted and almost gay.

Dr. Leidner came out from the laboratory and joined her. He was showing her a big dish with bull's horns on it.

'The prehistoric levels are being extraordinarily productive,' he said. 'It's been a good season so far. Finding that tomb right at the beginning was a real piece of luck. The only person who might complain is Father Lavigny. We've had hardly any tablets so far.'

'He doesn't seem to have done very much with the few we have had,' said Mrs. Leidner dryly. 'He may be a very fine epigraphist but he's a remarkably lazy one. He spends all his afternoons sleeping.'

'We miss Byrd,' said Dr. Leidner. 'This man strikes me as slightly unorthodox—though, of course, I'm not competent to judge. But one or two of his translations have been surprising to say the least of it. I can hardly believe, for instance, that he's right about that inscribed brick, and yet he must know.'

After tea Mrs. Leidner asked me if I would like to stroll down to the river. I thought that perhaps she feared that her refusal to let me accompany her earlier in the afternoon might have hurt my feelings.

I wanted her to know that I wasn't the touchy kind, so I accepted at once.

It was a lovely evening. A path led between barley fields and then through some flowering fruit trees. Finally we came to the edge of the Tigris. Immediately on our left was the Tell with the workmen singing in their queer monotonous chant. A little to our right was a big water-wheel which made a queer groaning noise. It used to set my teeth on edge at first. But in the end I got fond of it and it had a queer soothing effect on me. Beyond the water-wheel was the village from which most of the workmen came.

'It's rather beautiful, isn't it?' said Mrs. Leidner.

'It's very peaceful,' I said. 'It seems funny to me to be so far away from everywhere.'

'Far from everywhere,' repeated Mrs. Leidner. 'Yes. Here at least one might expect to be safe.'

I glanced at her sharply, but I think she was speaking more to herself than to me, and I don't think she realised that her words had been revealing.

We began to walk back to the house.

Suddenly Mrs. Leidner clutched my arm so violently that I nearly cried out.

'Who's that, nurse? What's he doing?'

Some little distance ahead of us, just where the path ran near the expedition house, a man was standing. He wore European clothes

and he seemed to be standing on tiptoe and trying to look in at one of the windows.

As we watched he glanced round, caught sight of us, and immediately continued on the path towards us. I felt Mrs. Leidner's clutch tighten.

'Nurse,' she whispered. 'Nurse . . .'

'It's all right, my dear, it's all right,' I said reassuringly.

The man came along and passed us. He was an Iraqi, and as soon as she saw him near to, Mrs. Leidner relaxed with a sigh.

'He's only an Iraqi after all,' she said.

We went on our way. I glanced up at the windows as I passed. Not only were they barred, but they were too high from the ground to permit of any one seeing in, for the level of the ground was lower here than on the inside of the courtyard.

'It must have been just curiosity,' I said.

Mrs. Leidner nodded.

'That's all. But just for a minute I thought——'

She broke off.

I thought to myself, 'You thought *what*? That's what I'd like to know? *What* did you think?'

But I knew one thing now—that Mrs. Leidner was afraid of a definite flesh and blood person.

CHAPTER VIII

NIGHT ALARM

IT'S A LITTLE DIFFICULT to know exactly what to note in the week that followed my arrival at Tell Yarimjah.

Looking back as I do from my present standpoint of knowledge I can see a good many little signs and indications that I was quite blind to at the time.

To tell the story properly, however, I think I ought to try to recapture the point of view that I actually held—puzzled, uneasy, and increasingly conscious of *something* wrong.

For one thing *was* certain, that curious sense of strain and constraint was *not* imagined. It was genuine. Even Bill Coleman the insensitive commented upon it.

'This place gets under my skin,' I heard him say. 'Are they always such a glum lot?'

It was David Emmott to whom he spoke, the other assistant. I had taken rather a fancy to Mr. Emmott, his taciturnity was not, I felt sure, unfriendly. There was something about him that seemed very steadfast and reassuring in an atmosphere where one was uncertain what any one was feeling or thinking.

'No,' he said in answer to Mr. Coleman. 'It wasn't like this last year.'

But he didn't enlarge on the theme, or say any more.

'What I can't make out is what it's all about,' said Mr. Coleman in an aggrieved voice.

Emmott shrugged his shoulders but didn't answer.

I had a rather enlightening conversation with Miss Johnson. I liked her very much. She was capable, practical and intelligent. She had, it was quite obvious, a distinct hero worship for Dr. Leidner.

On this occasion she told me the story of his life since his young days. She knew every site he had dug, and the results of the dig. I would almost dare swear she could quote from every lecture he had ever delivered. She considered him, she told me, quite the finest field archaeologist living.

'And he's so simple. So completely unworldly. He doesn't know the meaning of the word conceit. Only a really great man could be so simple.'

'That's true enough,' I said. 'Big people don't need to throw their weight about.'

'And he's so light-hearted too. I can't tell you what fun we used to have—he and Richard Carey and I—the first years we were out here. We were such a happy party. Richard Carey worked with him in Palestine, of course. Theirs is a friendship of ten years or so. Oh, well, I've known him for seven.'

'What a handsome man Mr. Carey is,' I said.

'Yes—I suppose he is.'

She said it rather curtly.

'But he's just a little bit quiet, don't you think?'

'He usedn't to be like that,' said Miss Johnson quickly. 'It's only since——'

She stopped abruptly.

'Only since——?' I prompted.

'Oh, well.' Miss Johnson gave a characteristic motion of her shoulders. 'A good many things are changed nowadays.'

I didn't answer. I hoped she would go on—and she did—prefacing her remarks with a little laugh as though to detract from their importance.

'I'm afraid I'm rather a conservative old fogey. I sometimes think that if an archaeologist's wife isn't really interested, it would be wiser for her not to accompany the expedition. It often leads to friction.'

'Mrs. Mercado——' I suggested.

'Oh, her!' Miss Johnson brushed the suggestion aside. 'I was really thinking of Mrs. Leidner. She's a very charming woman—and one can quite understand why Dr. Leidner "fell for her"—to use a slang term. But I can't help feeling she's out of place here. She—it unsettles things.'

So Miss Johnson agreed with Mrs. Kelsey that it was Mrs. Leidner who was responsible for the strained atmosphere. But then where did Mrs. Leidner's own nervous fears come in?

'It unsettles *him*,' said Miss Johnson earnestly. 'Of course, I'm—well, I'm like a faithful but jealous old dog. I don't like to see him so worn out and worried. His whole mind ought to be on the work—not taken up with his wife and her silly fears! If she's nervous of coming to out-of-the-way places, she ought to have stayed in America. I've no patience with people who come to a place and then do nothing but grouse about it!'

And then, a little fearful of having said more than she meant to say, she went on:

'Of course I admire her very much. She's a lovely woman and she's got great charm of manner when she chooses.'

And there the subject dropped.

I thought to myself that it was always the same way—wherever women are cooped up together, there's bound to be jealousy. Miss Johnson clearly didn't like her chief's wife (that was perhaps natural) and unless I was much mistaken Mrs. Mercado fairly hated her.

Another person who didn't like Mrs. Leidner was Sheila Reilly. She came out once or twice to the dig, once in a car and twice with some young man on a horse—on two horses I mean, of course. It was at the back of my mind that she had a weakness for the silent young American, Emmott. When he was on duty at the dig she used to stay talking to him, and I thought, too, that *he* admired *her*.

One day, rather injudiciously, I thought, Mrs. Leidner commented upon it at lunch.

'The Reilly girl is still hunting David down,' she said with a little laugh. 'Poor David, she chases you up on the dig even! How foolish girls are!'

Mr. Emmott didn't answer, but under his tan his face got rather red. He raised his eyes and looked right into hers with a very curious expression—a straight, steady glance with something of a challenge in it.

She smiled very faintly and looked away.

I heard Father Lavigny murmur something, but when I said 'Pardon?' he merely shook his head and did not repeat his remark.

That afternoon Mr. Coleman said to me:

'Matter of fact I didn't like Mrs. L. any too much at first. She used to jump down my throat every time I opened my mouth. But I've begun to understand her better now. She's one of the kindest women I've ever met. You find yourself telling her all the foolish scrapes you ever got into before you know where you are. She's got her knife into Sheila Reilly, I know, but then Sheila's been damned rude to her once or twice. That's the worst of Sheila—she's got no manners. And a temper like the devil!'

That I could well believe. Dr. Reilly spoilt her.

'Of course she's bound to get a bit full of herself, being the only young woman in the place. But that doesn't excuse her talking to Mrs. Leidner as though Mrs. Leidner were her great-aunt. Mrs. L's not exactly a chicken, but she's a damned good-looking woman. Rather like those fairy women who come out of marshes with lights and lure you away.' He added bitterly, 'You wouldn't find Sheila luring any one. All she does is to tick a fellow off.'

I only remember two other incidents of any kind of significance.

One was when I went to the laboratory to fetch some acetone to get the stickiness off my fingers from mending the pottery. Mr. Mercado was sitting in a corner, his head was laid down on his arms and I fancied he was asleep. I took the bottle I wanted and went off with it.

That evening, to my great surprise, Mrs. Mercado tackled me.

'Did you take a bottle of acetone from the lab?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I did.'

'You know perfectly well that there's a small bottle always kept in the antika-room.'

She spoke quite angrily.

'Is there? I didn't know.'

'I think you did! You just wanted to come spying round. I know what hospital nurses are.'

I stared at her.

'I don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. Mercado,' I said with dignity. 'I'm sure I don't want to spy on any one.'

'Oh, no! Of course not. Do you think I don't know what you're here for?'

Really, for a minute or two I thought she must have been drinking. I went away without saying any more. But I thought it was very odd.

The other thing was nothing very much. I was trying to entice a pi dog pup with a piece of bread. It was very timid, however, like all Arab dogs—and was convinced I meant no good. It slunk away and I followed it—out through the archway and round the corner of the house. I came round so sharply that before I knew I had cannoned into Father Lavigny and another man who were standing together—and in a minute I realised that the second man was the same one Mrs. Leidner and I had noticed that day trying to peer through the window.

I apologised and Father Lavigny smiled, and with a word of farewell greeting to the other man he returned to the house with me.

'You know,' he said, 'I am very ashamed. I am a student of Oriental languages and none of the men on the work can understand me! It is humiliating, do you not think? I was trying my Arabic on that man, who is a townsman, to see if I got on better—but it still wasn't very successful. Leidner says my Arabic is too pure.'

That was all. But it just passed through my head that it was odd the same man should still be hanging round the house.

That night we had a scare.

It must have been about two in the morning. I'm a light sleeper, as most nurses have to be. I was awake and sitting up in bed by the time that my door opened.

'Nurse, nurse!'

It was Mrs. Leidner's voice, low and urgent.

I struck a match and lighted the candle.

She was standing by the door in a long blue dressing-gown. She was looking petrified with terror.

'There's some one—some one—in the room next to mine. . . . I heard him—scratching on the wall.'

I jumped out of bed and came to her.

'It's all right,' I said. 'I'm here. Don't be afraid, my dear.'

She whispered:

‘Get Eric.’

I nodded and ran out and knocked on his door. In a minute he was with us. Mrs. Leidner was sitting on my bed, her breath coming in great gasps.

‘I heard him,’ she said. ‘I heard him—scratching on the wall.’

‘Some one in the antika-room?’ cried Dr. Leidner.

He ran out quickly—and it just flashed across my mind how differently these two had reacted. Mrs. Leidner’s fear was entirely personal, but Dr. Leidner’s mind leaped at once to his precious treasures.

‘The antika-room!’ breathed Mrs. Leidner. ‘Of course! How stupid of me.’

And rising and pulling her gown round her, she bade me come with her. All traces of her panic-stricken fear had vanished.

We arrived in the antika-room to find Dr. Leidner and Father Lavigny. The latter had also heard a noise, had risen to investigate, and had fancied he saw a light in the antika-room. He had delayed to put on slippers and snatch up a torch and had found no one by the time he got there. The door, moreover, was duly locked, as it was supposed to be at night.

Whilst he was assuring himself that nothing had been taken, Dr. Leidner had joined him.

Nothing more was to be learned. The outside archway door was locked. The guard swore nobody could have got in from outside, but as they had probably been fast asleep this was not conclusive. There were no marks or traces of an intruder and nothing had been taken.

It was possible that what had alarmed Mrs. Leidner was the noise made by Father Lavigny taking down boxes from the shelves to assure himself that all was in order.

On the other hand, Father Lavigny himself was positive that he had (*a*) heard footsteps passing his window and (*b*) seen the flicker of a light, possibly a torch, in the antika-room.

Nobody else had heard or seen anything.

The incident is of value in my narrative because it led to Mrs. Leidner’s unburdening herself to me on the following day.

CHAPTER IX

MRS LEIDNER'S STORY

WE HAD JUST finished lunch. Mrs. Leidner went to her room to rest as usual. I settled her on her bed with plenty of pillows and her book, and was leaving the room when she called me back.

'Don't go, nurse, there's something I want to say to you.'

I came back into the room.

'Shut the door.'

I obeyed.

She got up from the bed and began to walk up and down the room. I could see that she was making up her mind to something and I didn't like to interrupt her. She was clearly in great indecision of mind.

At last she seemed to have nerved herself to the required point. She turned to me and said abruptly:

'Sit down.'

I sat down by the table very quietly. She began nervously:

'You must have wondered what all this is about?'

I just nodded without saying anything.

'I've made up my mind to tell you—everything! I must tell some one or I shall go mad.'

'Well,' I said. 'I think really it would be just as well. It's not easy to know the best thing to do when one's kept in the dark.'

She stopped in her uneasy walk and faced me.

'Do you know what I'm frightened of?'

'Some man,' I said.

'Yes—but I didn't say whom—I said what.'

I waited.

She said: '*I'm afraid of being killed!*'

Well, it was out now. I wasn't going to show any particular concern. She was near enough hysterics as it was.

'Dear me,' I said. 'So that's it, is it?'

Then she began to laugh. She laughed and she laughed—and the tears ran down her face.

'The way you said that!' she gasped. 'The way you said it . . .'

'Now, now,' I said. 'This won't do.' I spoke sharply. I pushed her into a chair, went over to the wash-stand and got a cold sponge and bathed her forehead and wrists.

'No more nonsense,' I said. 'Tell me calmly and sensibly all about it.'

That stopped her. She sat up and spoke in her natural voice.

'You're a treasure, nurse,' she said. 'You make me feel as though I'm six. I'm going to tell you.'

'That's right,' I said. 'Take your time and don't hurry.'

She began to speak, slowly and deliberately.

'When I was a girl of twenty I married. A young man in one of our state departments. It was in 1918.'

'I know,' I said. 'Mrs. Mercado told me. He was killed in the war.'

But Mrs. Leidner shook her head.

'That's what she thinks. That's what everybody thinks. The truth is something quite different. I was a queer patriotic, enthusiastic girl, nurse, full of idealism. When I'd been married a few months I discovered—by a quite unforeseeable accident—that my husband was a spy in German pay. I learned that the information supplied by him had led directly to the sinking of an American transport and the loss of hundreds of lives. I don't know what most people would have done. . . . But I'll tell you what I did. I went straight to my father, who was in the War Department, and told him the truth. Frederick *was* killed in the war—but he was killed in America—shot as a spy.'

'Oh dear, dear!' I ejaculated. 'How terrible!'

'Yes,' she said. 'It was terrible. He was so kind, too—so gentle . . . And all the time . . . But I never hesitated. Perhaps I was wrong.'

'It's difficult to say,' I said. 'I'm sure I don't know what one would do.'

'What I'm telling you was never generally known outside the state departments. Ostensibly my husband had gone to the front and had been killed. I had a lot of sympathy and kindness shown me as a war widow.'

Her voice was bitter and I nodded comprehendingly.

'Lots of people wanted to marry me, but I always refused. I'd had too bad a shock. I didn't feel I could ever *trust* any one again.'

'Yes, I can imagine feeling like that.'

'And then I became very fond of a certain young man. I wavered. An amazing thing happened! I got an anonymous letter—from Frederick—saying that if I ever married another man, he'd kill me!'

'From Frederick? From your dead husband?'

'Yes. Of course, I thought at first I was mad or dreaming. . . . At last I went to my father. He told me the truth. My husband hadn't been shot after all. He'd escaped—but his escape did him no good. He was involved in a train wreck a few weeks later and his dead body was found amongst others. My father had kept the fact of his escape from me, and since the man had died anyway he had seen no reason to tell me anything until now.

'But the letter I received opened up entirely new possibilities. Was it perhaps a fact that my husband was still alive?'

'My father went into the matter as carefully as possible. And he declared that as far as one could humanly be sure the body that was buried as Frederick's *was* Frederick's. There had been a certain amount of disfiguration, so that he could not speak with absolute cast-iron certainty, but he reiterated his solemn belief that Frederick was dead and that this letter was a cruel and malicious hoax.

'The same thing happened more than once. If I seemed to be on intimate terms with any man, I would receive a threatening letter.'

'In your husband's handwriting?'

She said slowly:

'That is difficult to say. I had no letters of his. I had only my memory to go by.'

'There was no allusion or special form of words used that could make you sure?'

'No. There *were* certain terms—nicknames, for instance—private between us—if one of those had been used or quoted, then I should have been quite sure.'

'Yes,' I said thoughtfully. 'That is odd. It looks as though it *wasn't* your husband. But is there any one else it could be?'

'There is a possibility. Frederick had a younger brother—a boy of ten or twelve at the time of our marriage. He worshipped Frederick and Frederick was devoted to him. What happened to this boy, William his name was, I don't know. It seems to me possible that, adoring his brother as fanatically as he did, he may have grown up regarding me as directly responsible for his death. He had always been jealous of me and may have invented this scheme by way of punishment.'

'It's possible,' I said. 'It's amazing the way children do remember if they've had a shock.'

'I know. This boy may have dedicated his life to revenge.'

'Please go on.'

'There isn't very much more to tell. I met Eric three years ago. I meant never to marry. Eric made me change my mind. Right up to our wedding day I waited for another threatening letter. None came. I decided that whoever the writer might be, he was either dead, or tired of his cruel sport. *Two days after our marriage I got this.*'

Drawing a small attaché-case which was on the table towards her, she unlocked it, took out a letter and handed it to me.

The ink was slightly faded. It was written in a rather womanish hand with a forward slant.

You have disobeyed. Now you cannot escape. You must be Frederick Bosner's wife only! You have got to die.

'I was frightened—but not so much as I might have been to begin with. Being with Eric made me feel safe. Then, a month later, I got a second letter.'

I have not forgotten. I am making my plans. You have got to die. Why did you disobey?

'Does your husband know about this?'

Mrs. Leidner answered slowly.

'He knows that I am threatened. I showed him both letters when the second one came. He was inclined to think the whole thing a hoax. He thought also that it might be some one who wanted to blackmail me by pretending my first husband was alive.'

She paused and then went on.

'A few days after I received the second letter we had a narrow escape from death by gas poisoning. Somebody entered our apartment after we were asleep and turned on the gas. Luckily I woke and smelled the gas in time. Then I lost my nerve. I told Eric how I had been persecuted for years, and I told him that I was sure this madman, whoever he might be, did really mean to kill me. I think that for the first time I really did think it *was* Frederick. There was always something a little ruthless behind his gentleness.

'Eric was still, I think, less alarmed than I was. He wanted to go to the police. Naturally I wouldn't hear of that. In the end we agreed that I should accompany him here, and that it might be wise if I didn't return to America in the summer but stayed in London and Paris.

'We carried out our plan and all went well. I felt sure that now everything would be all right. After all, we had put half the globe between ourselves and my enemy.

'And then—a little over three weeks ago—I received a letter—with an Iraq stamp on it.'

She handed me a third letter.

You thought you could escape. You were wrong. You shall not be false to me and live. I have always told you so. Death is coming very soon.

'And a week ago—*this!* Just lying on the table here. It had not even gone through the post.'

I took the sheet of paper from her. There was just one phrase scrawled across it.

'I have arrived.'

She stared at me.

'You see? You understand? He's going to kill me. It may be Frederick—it may be little William—but *he's going to kill me.*'

Her voice rose shudderingly. I caught her wrist.

'Now—now,' I said warningly. 'Don't give way. We'll look after you. Have you got any sal volatile?'

She nodded towards the wash-stand and I gave her a good dose.

'That's better,' I said, as the colour returned to her cheeks.

'Yes, I'm better now. But oh, nurse, do you see why I'm in this state? When I saw that man looking in through my window, I thought: *he's come.* . . . Even when you arrived I was suspicious. I thought you might be a man in disguise——'

'The idea!'

'Oh, I know it sounds absurd. But you might have been in league with him perhaps—not a hospital nurse at all.'

'But that's nonsense!'

'Yes, perhaps. But I've got beyond sense.'

Struck by a sudden idea, I said:

'You'd *recognise* your husband, I suppose?'

She answered slowly.

'I don't even know that. It's over fifteen years ago. I mightn't recognise his face.'

Then she shivered.

'I saw it one night—but it was a *dead* face. There was a tap, tap, tap on the window. And then I saw a face, a dead face, ghastly and grinning against the pane. I screamed and screamed. . . . And they said there wasn't anything there!'

I remembered Mrs. Mercado's story.

'You don't think,' I said hesitatingly, 'that you *dreamt* that?'

'I'm sure I didn't!'

I wasn't so sure. It was the kind of nightmare that was quite likely under the circumstances and that easily might be taken for a waking occurrence. However, I never contradict a patient. I soothed Mrs. Leidner as best I could and pointed out that if any stranger arrived in the neighbourhood it was pretty sure to be known.

I left her, I think, a little comforted, and I went in search of Dr. Leidner and told him of our conversation.

'I'm glad she's told you,' he said simply. 'It has worried me dreadfully. I feel sure that all those faces andappings on the window-pane have been sheer imagination on her part. I haven't known what to do for the best. What do you think of the whole thing?'

I didn't quite understand the tone in his voice, but I answered promptly enough.

'It's possible,' I said, 'that these letters may be just a cruel and malicious hoax.'

'Yes, that is quite likely. But what are we to *do*? They are driving her mad. I don't know what to think.'

I didn't either. It had occurred to me that possibly a woman might be concerned. Those letters had a feminine note about them. Mrs. Mercado was at the back of my mind.

Supposing that by some chance she had learnt the facts of Mrs. Leidner's first marriage? She might be indulging her spite by terrorising the other woman.

I didn't quite like to suggest such a thing to Dr. Leidner. It's so difficult to know how people are going to take things.

'Oh, well,' I said cheerfully, 'we must hope for the best. I think Mrs. Leidner seems happier already from just talking about it. That's always a help, you know. It's bottling things up that makes them get on your nerves.'

'I'm very glad she had told you,' he repeated. 'It's a good sign. It shows she likes and trusts you. I've been at my wits end to know what to do for the best.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him whether he'd thought of giving a discreet hint to the local police, but afterwards I was glad I hadn't done so.

What happened was this. On the following day Mr. Coleman was going in to Hassanieh to get the workmen's pay. He was also taking in all our letters to catch the air mail.

The letters, as written, were dropped into a wooden box on the

dining-room window-sill. Last thing that night Mr. Coleman took them out and was sorting them out into bundles and putting rubber-bands round them.

Suddenly he gave a shout.

'What is it?' I asked.

He held out a letter with a grin.

'It's our Lovely Louise—she really *is* going balmy. She's addressed a letter to some one at 42nd Street, Paris, France. I don't think that can be right, do you? Do you mind taking it to her and asking what she *does* mean? She's just gone off to bed.'

I took it from him and ran off to Mrs. Leidner with it and she amended the address.

It was the first time I had seen Mrs. Leidner's handwriting, and I wondered idly where I had seen it before, for it was certainly quite familiar to me.

It wasn't till the middle of the night that it suddenly came to me.

Except that it was bigger and rather more straggling, *it was extraordinarily like the writing on the anonymous letters.*

New ideas flashed through my head.

Had Mrs. Leidner conceivably written those letters *herself*?

And did Dr. Leidner half-suspect the fact?

CHAPTER X

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

MRS. LEIDNER told me her story on a Friday.

On Saturday morning there was a feeling of slight anti-climax in the air.

Mrs. Leidner, in particular, was inclined to be very off-hand with me and rather pointedly avoided any possibility of a *tête-à-tête*. Well, *that* didn't surprise me! I've had the same thing happen to me again and again. Ladies tell their nurses things in a sudden burst of confidence, and then, afterwards, they feel uncomfortable about it and wish they hadn't! It's only human nature.

I was very careful not to hint or remind her in any way of what she had told me. I purposely kept my conversation as matter-of-fact as possible.

Mr. Coleman had started in to Hassanieh in the morning, driving himself in the lorry with the letters in a knapsack. He also had one or two commissions to do for the members of the expedition. It was pay-day for the men, and he would have to go to the bank and bring out the money in coins of small denominations. All this was a long business and he did not expect to be back until the afternoon. I rather suspected he might be lunching with Sheila Reilly.

Work on the dig was usually not very busy on the afternoon of pay-day as at three-thirty the paying-out began.

The little boy, Abdullah, whose business it was to wash pots, was established as usual in the centre of the courtyard, and again as usual, kept up his queer nasal chant. Dr. Leidner and Mr. Emmott were going to put in some work on the pottery until Mr. Coleman returned, and Mr. Carey went up to the dig.

Mrs. Leidner went to her room to rest. I settled her as usual and then went to my own room, taking a book with me as I did not feel sleepy. It was then about a quarter to one, and a couple of hours passed quite pleasantly. I was reading *Death in a Nursing Home*—really a most exciting story—though I don't think the author knew much about the way nursing homes are run! At any rate I've never known a nursing home like that! I really felt inclined to write to the author and put him right about a few points.

When I put the book down at last (it was the red-haired parlour-maid and I'd never suspected her once!) and looked at my watch I was quite surprised to find it was twenty minutes to three!

I got up, straightened my uniform, and came out into the courtyard.

Abdullah was still scrubbing and still singing his depressing chant, and David Emmott was standing by him sorting the scrubbed pots, and putting the ones that were broken into boxes to await mending. I strolled over towards them just as Dr. Leidner came down the staircase from the roof.

'Not a bad afternoon,' he said cheerfully. 'I've made a bit of a clearance up there. Louise will be pleased. She's complained lately that there's not room to walk about. I'll go and tell her the good news.'

He went over to his wife's door, tapped on it and went in.

It must, I suppose, have been about a minute and a half later that he came out again. I happened to be looking at the door when he did so. It was like a nightmare. He had gone in a brisk, cheerful man.

He came out like a drunken one—reeling a little on his feet, and with a queer dazed expression on his face.

‘Nurse——’ he called in a queer, hoarse voice. ‘Nurse——’

I saw at once something was wrong and I ran across to him. He looked awful—his face was all grey and twitching, and I saw he might collapse any minute.

‘My wife . . .’ he said. ‘My wife . . . Oh, my God . . .’

I pushed past him into the room. Then I caught my breath.

Mrs. Leidner was lying in a dreadful huddled heap by the bed.

I bent over her. She was quite dead—must have been dead an hour at least. The cause of death was perfectly plain—a terrific blow on the front of the head just over the right temple. She must have got up from the bed and been struck down where she stood.

I didn’t handle her more than I could help.

I glanced round the room to see if there was anything that might give a clue, but nothing seemed out of place or disturbed. The windows were closed and fastened, and there was no place where the murderer could have hidden. Obviously he had been and gone long ago.

I went out, closing the door behind me.

Dr. Leidner had collapsed completely now. David Emmott was with him and turned a white, inquiring face to me.

In a few low words I told him what had happened.

As I had always suspected, he was a first-class person to rely on in trouble. He was perfectly calm and self-possessed. Those blue eyes of his opened very wide, but otherwise he gave no sign at all.

He considered for a moment and then said:

‘I suppose we must notify the police as soon as possible. Bill ought to be back any minute. What shall we do with Leidner?’

‘Help me to get him into his room.’

He nodded.

‘Better lock this door first, I suppose,’ he said.

He turned the key in the lock of Mrs. Leidner’s door, then drew it out and handed it to me.

‘I guess you’d better keep this, nurse. Now then.’

Together we lifted Dr. Leidner and carried him into his own room and laid him on his bed. Mr. Emmott went off in search of brandy. He returned, accompanied by Miss Johnson.

Her face was drawn and anxious, but she was calm and capable, and I felt satisfied to leave Dr. Leidner in her charge.

I hurried out into the courtyard. The station wagon was just coming in through the archway. I think it gave us all a shock to see Bill's pink, cheerful face as he jumped out with his familiar 'Hallo, allo, allo! Here's the oof!' He went on gaily, 'No highway robberies——'

He came to a halt suddenly. 'I say, is anything up? What's the matter with you all? You look as though the cat had killed your canary.'

Mr. Emmott said shortly:

'Mrs. Leidner's dead—killed.'

'What?' Bill's jolly face changed ludicrously. He stared, his eyes goggling. 'Mother Leidner dead! You're pulling my leg.'

'Dead?' It was a sharp cry. I turned to see Mrs. Mercado behind me. 'Did you say Mrs. Leidner had been *killed*?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Murdered.'

'No!' she gasped. 'Oh, no! I won't believe it. Perhaps she's committed suicide.'

'Suicides don't hit themselves on the head,' I said dryly. 'It's murder all right, Mrs. Mercado.'

She sat down suddenly on an upturned packing-case.

She said, 'Oh, but this is horrible—*horrible* . . .'

Naturally it was horrible. We didn't need *her* to tell us so! I wondered if perhaps she was feeling a bit remorseful for the harsh feelings she had harboured against the dead woman, and all the spiteful things she had said.

After a minute or two she asked rather breathlessly:

'What are you going to do?'

Mr. Emmott took charge in his quiet way.

'Bill, you'd better get in again to Hassanieh as quick as you can. I don't know much about the proper procedure. Better get hold of Captain Maitland, he's in charge of the police here, I think. Get Dr. Reilly first. He'll know what to do.'

Mr. Coleman nodded. All the facetiousness was knocked out of him. He just looked young and frightened. Without a word he jumped into the station wagon and drove off.

Mr. Emmott said rather uncertainly, 'I suppose we ought to have a hunt round.' He raised his voice and called:

'Ibrahim!'

'Na'am.'

The house-boy came running. Mr. Emmott spoke to him in

Arabic. A vigorous colloquy passed between them. The boy seemed to be emphatically denying something.

At last Mr. Emmott said in a perplexed voice:

'He says there's not been a soul here this afternoon. No stranger of any kind. I suppose the fellow must have slipped in without their seeing him.'

'Of course he did,' said Mrs. Mercado. 'He slunk in when the boys weren't looking.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Emmott.

The slight uncertainty in his voice made me look at him inquiringly.

He turned and spoke to the little pot-boy, Abdullah, asking him a question.

The boy replied vehemently at length.

The puzzled frown on Mr. Emmott's brow increased.

'I don't understand it,' he murmured under his breath. 'I don't understand it at all.'

But he didn't tell me what he didn't understand.

CHAPTER XI

AN ODD BUSINESS

I'M ADHERING as far as possible to telling only my personal part in the business. I pass over the events of the next two hours, the arrival of Captain Maitland and the police and Dr. Reilly. There was a good deal of general confusion, questioning, all the routine business, I suppose.

In my opinion we began to get down to brass tacks about five o'clock when Dr. Reilly asked me to come with him into the office.

He shut the door, sat down in Dr. Leidner's chair, motioned me to sit down opposite him, and said briskly:

'Now, then, nurse, let's get down to it. There's something damned odd here.'

I settled my cuffs and looked at him inquiringly.

He drew out a notebook.

'This is for my own satisfaction. Now, what time was it exactly when Dr. Leidner found his wife's body?'

'I should say it was almost exactly a quarter to three,' I said.

'And how do you know that?'

'Well, I looked at my watch when I got up. It was twenty to three then.'

'Let's have a look at this watch of yours.'

I slipped it off my wrist and held it out to him.

'Right to the minute. Excellent woman. Good, that's *that* fixed. Now did you form any opinion as to how long she'd been dead?'

'Oh, really doctor,' I said, 'I shouldn't like to say.'

'Don't be so professional. I want to see if your estimate agrees with mine.'

'Well, I should say she'd been dead at least an hour.'

'Quite so. I examined the body at half-past four and I'm inclined to put the time of death between 1.15 and 1.45. We'll say half-past one at a guess. That's near enough.'

He stopped and drummed thoughtfully with his fingers on the table.

'Damned odd, this business,' he said. 'Can you tell me about it—you were resting, you say? Did you hear anything?'

'At half-past one? No, doctor. I didn't hear anything at half-past one or at any other time. I lay on my bed from a quarter to one until twenty to three and I didn't hear anything except that droning noise the Arab boy makes, and occasionally Mr. Emmott shouting up to Dr. Leidner on the roof.'

'The Arab boy—yes.'

He frowned.

At that moment the door opened and Dr. Leidner and Captain Maitland came in. Captain Maitland was a fussy little man with a pair of shrewd grey eyes.

Dr. Reilly rose and pushed Dr. Leidner into his chair.

'Sit down, man. I'm glad you've come. We shall want you. There's something very queer about this business.'

Dr. Leidner bowed his head.

'I know.' He looked at me. 'My wife confided the truth to Nurse Leatheran. We mustn't keep anything back at this juncture, nurse, so please tell Captain Maitland and Dr. Reilly just what passed between you and my wife yesterday.'

As nearly as possible I gave our conversation verbatim.

Captain Maitland uttered an occasional ejaculation. When I had finished he turned to Dr. Leidner.

'And this is all true Leidner—eh?'

'Every word Nurse Leatheran has told you is correct.'

'What an extraordinary story,' said Dr. Reilly. 'You can produce these letters?'

'I have no doubt they will be found amongst my wife's belongings.'

'She took them out of the attaché-case on her table,' I said.

'Then they are probably still there.'

He turned to Captain Maitland and his usually gentle face grew hard and stern.

'There must be no question of hushing this story up, Captain Maitland. The one thing necessary is for this man to be caught and punished.'

'You believe it actually is Mrs. Leidner's former husband?' I asked.

'Don't you think so, nurse?' asked Captain Maitland.

'Well, I think it is open to doubt,' I said hesitatingly.

'In any case,' said Dr. Leidner, 'the man is a murderer—and I should say a dangerous lunatic also. He *must* be found, Captain Maitland. He must. It should not be difficult.'

Dr. Reilly said slowly:

'It may be more difficult than you think . . . eh, Maitland?'

Captain Maitland tugged at his moustache without replying.

Suddenly I gave a start.

'Excuse me,' I said, 'but there's something perhaps I ought to mention.'

I told my story of the Iraqi we had seen trying to peer through the window, and of how I had seen him hanging about the place two days ago trying to pump Father Lavigny.

'Good,' said Captain Maitland, 'we'll make a note of that. It will be something for the police to go on. The man may have some connection with the case.'

'Probably paid to act as a spy,' I suggested. 'To find out when the coast was clear.'

Dr. Reilly rubbed his nose with a harassed gesture.

'That's the devil of it,' he said. 'Supposing the coast wasn't clear—eh?'

I stared at him in a puzzled fashion.

Captain Maitland turned to Dr. Leidner.

'I want you to listen to me very carefully, Leidner. This is a review of the evidence we've got up to date. After lunch, which was served at twelve o'clock and was over by five and twenty to one, your wife

went to her room accompanied by Nurse Leatheran, who settled her comfortably. You yourself went up to the roof, where you spent the next two hours, is that right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you come down from the roof at all during that time?’

‘No.’

‘Did any one come up to you?’

‘Yes, Emmott did pretty frequently. He went to and fro between me and the boy, who was washing pottery down below.’

‘Did you yourself look over into the courtyard at all?’

‘Once or twice—usually to call to Emmott about something.’

‘On each occasion the boy was sitting in the middle of the courtyard washing pots?’

‘Yes.’

‘What was the longest period of time when Emmott was with you and absent from the courtyard?’

Dr. Leidner considered.

‘It’s difficult to say—perhaps ten minutes. Personally I should say two or three minutes, but I know by experience that my sense of time is not very good when I am absorbed and interested in what I am doing.’

Captain Maitland looked at Dr. Reilly. The latter nodded. ‘We’d better get down to it,’ he said.

Captain Maitland took out a small notebook and opened it.

‘Look here, Leidner, I’m going to read to you exactly what every member of your expedition was doing between one and two this afternoon.’

‘But surely——’

‘Wait. You’ll see what I’m driving at in a minute. First Mr. and Mrs. Mercado. Mr. Mercado says he was working in his laboratory. Mrs. Mercado says she was in her bedroom shampooing her hair. Miss Johnson says she was in the living-room taking impressions of cylinder seals. Mr. Reiter says he was in the dark-room developing plates. Father Lavigny says he was working in his bedroom. As to the two remaining members of the expedition, Carey and Coleman, the former was up on the dig and Coleman was in Hassanieh. So much for the members of the expedition. Now for the servants. The cook—your Indian chap—was sitting immediately outside the archway chatting to the guard and plucking a couple of fowls. Ibrahim and Mansur, the house-boys, joined him there at about 1.15. They

both remained there laughing and talking until 2.30—*by which time your wife was already dead.*'

Dr. Leidner leaned forward.

'I don't understand—you puzzle me. What are you hinting at?'

'Is there any means of access to your wife's room except by the door into the courtyard?'

'No. There are two windows, but they are heavily barred—and besides, I think they were shut.'

He looked at me questioningly.

'They were closed and latched on the inside,' I said promptly.

'In any case,' said Captain Maitland, 'even if they had been open, no one could have entered or left the room that way. My fellows and I have assured ourselves of that. It is the same with all the other windows giving on the open country. They all have iron bars and all the bars are in good condition. To have got into your wife's room, a stranger *must* have come through the arched doorway into the courtyard. But we have the united assurances of the guard, the cook and the house-boy that *nobody did so.*'

Dr. Leidner sprang up.

'What do you mean? What do you mean?'

'Pull yourself together, man,' said Dr. Reilly quietly. 'I know it's a shock, but it's got to be faced. *The murderer didn't come from outside—*so he must have come from *inside*. It looks as though Mrs. Leidner must have been murdered *by a member of your own expedition.*'

CHAPTER XII

"I DIDN'T BELIEVE . . ."

'NO. NO!'

Dr. Leidner sprang up and walked up and down in an agitated manner.

'It's impossible what you say, Reilly. Absolutely impossible. One of *us*? Why, every single member of the expedition was devoted to Louise!'

A queer little expression pulled down the corners of Dr. Reilly's mouth. Under the circumstances it was difficult for him to say anything, but if ever a man's silence was eloquent his was at that minute.

'Quite impossible,' reiterated Dr. Leidner. 'They were all devoted to her. Louise had such wonderful charm. Every one felt it.'

Dr. Reilly coughed.

'Excuse me, Leidner, but after all that's only your opinion. If any member of the expedition had disliked your wife they would naturally not advertise the fact to you.'

Dr. Leidner looked distressed.

'True—quite true. But all the same, Reilly, I think you are wrong. I'm sure every one was fond of Louise.'

He was silent for a moment or two and then burst out.

'This idea of yours is infamous. It's—it's frankly incredible.'

'You can't get away from—er—the facts,' said Captain Maitland.

'Facts? Facts? Lies told by an Indian cook and a couple of Arab house-boys. You know these fellows as well as I do, Reilly, so do you, Maitland. Truth as truth means nothing to them. They say what you want them to say as a mere matter of politeness.'

'In this case,' said Dr. Reilly dryly, 'they are saying what we *don't* want them to say. Besides, I know the habits of your household fairly well. Just outside the gate is a kind of social club. Whenever I've been over here in the afternoon I've always found most of your staff there. It's the natural place for them to be.'

'All the same I think you are assuming too much. Why shouldn't this man—this devil—have got in earlier and concealed himself somewhere?'

'I agree that that is not actually impossible,' said Dr. Reilly coolly. 'Let us assume that a stranger *did* somehow gain admission unseen. He would have to remain concealed until the right moment (and he certainly couldn't have done so in Mrs. Leidner's room, there is no cover there) and take the risk of being seen entering the room and leaving it—with Emmott and the boy in the courtyard most of the time.'

'The boy. I'd forgotten the boy,' said Dr. Leidner. 'A sharp little chap. But surely, Maitland, the boy *must* have seen the murderer go into my wife's room?'

'We've elucidated that. The boy was washing pots the whole afternoon with one exception. Somewhere around half-past one—Emmott can't put it closer than that—he went up to the roof and was with you for ten minutes—that's right, isn't it?'

'Yes. I couldn't have told you the exact time but it must have been about that.'

'Very good. Well, during that ten minutes, the boy, seizing his

chance to be idle, strolled out and joined the others outside the gate for a chat. When Emmott came down he found the boy absent and called him angrily, asking him what he meant by leaving his work. As far as I can see, *your wife must have been murdered during that ten minutes.*'

With a groan Dr. Leidner sat down and hid his face in his hands.

Dr. Reilly took up the tale, his voice quiet and matter-of-fact.

'The time fits in with my evidence,' he said. 'She'd been dead about three hours when I examined her. The only question is—who did it?'

There was a silence. Dr. Leidner sat up in his chair and passed a hand over his forehead.

'I admit the force of your reasoning, Reilly,' he said quietly. 'It certainly *seems* as though it were what people call "an inside job." But I feel convinced that somewhere or other there is a mistake. It's plausible but there must be a flaw in it. To begin with, you are assuming that an amazing coincidence has occurred.'

'Odd that you should use that word,' said Dr. Reilly.

Without paying any attention Dr. Leidner went on:

'My wife receives threatening letters. She has reason to fear a certain person. Then she is—killed. And you ask me to believe that she is killed—not by that person—but by some one entirely different! I say that that is ridiculous.'

'It seems so—yes,' said Dr. Reilly meditatively.

He looked at Captain Maitland. 'Coincidence—eh? What do you say, Maitland? Are you in favour of the idea? Shall we put it up to Leidner?'

Captain Maitland gave a nod.

'Go ahead,' he said shortly.

'Have you ever heard of a man called Hercule Poirot, Leidner?'

Dr. Leidner stared at him, puzzled.

'I think I have heard the name, yes,' he said vaguely. 'I once heard a Mr. Van Aldin speak of him in very high terms. He is a private detective, is he not?'

'That's the man.'

'But surely he lives in London, so how will that help us?'

'He lives in London, true,' said Dr. Reilly, 'but this is where the coincidence comes in. He is now, not in London, but in Syria, and *he will actually pass through Hassanieh on his way to Baghdad to-morrow!*'

'Who told you this?'

'Jean Berat, the French consul. He dined with us last night and

was talking about him. It seems he has been disentangling some military scandal in Syria. He's coming through here to visit Baghdad, and afterwards returning through Syria to London. How's that for a coincidence?'

Dr. Leidner hesitated a moment and looked apologetically at Captain Maitland.

'What do you think, Captain Maitland?'

'Should welcome co-operation,' said Captain Maitland promptly. 'My fellows are good scouts at scouring the countryside and investigating Arab blood feuds, but frankly, Leidner, this business of your wife's seems to me rather out of my class. The whole thing looks confoundedly fishy. I'm more than willing to have the fellow take a look at the case.'

'You suggest that I should appeal to this man Poirot to help us?' said Dr. Leidner. 'And suppose he refuses?'

'He won't refuse,' said Dr. Reilly.

'How do you know?'

'Because I'm a professional man myself. If a really intricate case of say—cerebro spinal meningitis comes my way and I'm invited to take a hand, I shouldn't be able to refuse. This isn't an ordinary crime, Leidner.'

'No,' said Dr. Leidner. His lips twitched with sudden pain.

'Will you then, Reilly, approach this Hercule Poirot on my behalf?'

'I will.'

Dr. Leidner made a gesture of thanks.

'Even now,' he said slowly, 'I can't realise it—that Louise is really dead.'

I could bear it no longer.

'Oh! Dr. Leidner,' I burst out, 'I—I can't tell you how badly I feel about this. I've failed so badly in my duty. It was my job to watch over Mrs. Leidner—to keep her from harm.'

Dr. Leidner shook his head gravely.

'No, no, nurse, you've nothing to reproach yourself with,' he said slowly. 'It's I, God forgive me, who am to blame. . . . *I didn't believe*—all along I didn't believe . . . I didn't dream for one moment that there was any *real* danger. . . .'

He got up. His face twitched.

'*I let her go to her death. . . .* Yes, I let her go to her death—not *believing*—'

He staggered out of the room.

Dr. Reilly looked at me.

'I feel pretty culpable too,' he said. 'I thought the good lady was playing on his nerves.'

'I didn't take it really seriously either,' I confessed.

'We were all three wrong,' said Dr. Reilly gravely.

'So it seems,' said Captain Maitland.

CHAPTER XIII

HERCULE POIROT ARRIVES

I DON'T THINK I shall ever forget my first sight of Hercule Poirot. Of course, I got used to him later on, but to begin with it was a shock, and I think every one else must have felt the same!

I don't know what I'd imagined—something rather like Sherlock Holmes—long and lean with a keen, clever face. Of course, I knew he was a foreigner, but I hadn't expected him to be *quite* as foreign as he was, if you know what I mean.

When you saw him you just wanted to laugh! He was like something on the stage or at the pictures. To begin with, he wasn't above five-foot five, I should think—an odd plump little man, quite old, with an enormous moustache, and a head like an egg. He looked like a hairdresser in a comic play!

And this was the man who was going to find out who killed Mrs. Leidner!

I suppose something of my disgust must have shown in my face, for almost straightaway he said to me with a queer kind of twinkle:

'You disapprove of me, *ma soeur*? Remember, the pudding proves itself only when you eat it.'

The proof of the pudding's in the eating, I *suppose* he meant.

Well, that's a true enough saying, but I couldn't say I felt much confidence myself!

Dr. Reilly brought him out in his car soon after lunch on Sunday, and his first procedure was to ask us all to assemble together.

We did so in the dining-room, all sitting round the table. Mr. Poirot sat at the head of it with Dr. Leidner one side and Dr. Reilly the other.

When we were all assembled, Dr. Leidner cleared his throat and spoke in his gentle, hesitating voice.

'I dare say you have all heard of M. Hercule Poirot. He was passing through Hassanieh to-day, and has very kindly agreed to break his journey to help us. The Iraq police and Captain Maitland are, I am sure, doing their very best, but—but there are circumstances in the case'—he floundered and shot an appealing glance at Dr. Reilly—'there may, it seems, be difficulties. . . .'

'It is not all the square and overboard—no?' said the little man at the top of the table. Why, he couldn't even speak English properly!

'Oh, he *must* be caught!' cried Mrs. Mercado. 'It would be unbearable if he got away!'

I noticed the little foreigner's eyes rest on her appraisingly.

'He? Who is *he*, madame?' he asked.

'Why, the murderer, of course.'

'Ah! the murderer,' said Hercule Poirot.

He spoke as though the murderer was of no consequence at all!

We all stared at him. He looked from one face to another.

'It is likely, I think,' he said, 'that you have none of you been brought in contact with a case of murder before?'

There was a general murmur of assent.

Hercule Poirot smiled.

'It is clear, therefore, that you do not understand the A B C of the position. There are unpleasantnesses! Yes, there are a lot of unpleasantnesses. To begin with, there is *suspicion*.'

'Suspicion?'

It was Miss Johnson who spoke. Mr. Poirot looked at her thoughtfully. I had an idea that he regarded her with approval. He looked as though he were thinking, 'Here is a sensible, intelligent person!'

'Yes, mademoiselle,' he said. 'Suspicion! Let us not make the bones about it. *You are all under suspicion here in this house*. The cook, the house-boy, the scullion, the pot-boy—yes, and all the members of the expedition too.'

Mrs. Mercado started up, her face working.

'How *dare* you? How dare you say such a thing! This is odious—unbearable! Dr. Leidner—you can't sit here and let this man—and let this man——'

Dr. Leidner said wearily:

'Please try and be calm, Marie.'

Mr. Mercado stood up too. His hands were shaking and his eyes were bloodshot.

'I agree. It is an outrage—an insult——'

'No, no,' said Mr. Poirot. 'I do not insult you. I merely ask you all to face facts. *In a house where murder has been committed, every inmate comes in for a certain share of suspicion.* I ask you what evidence is there that the murderer came from outside at all?'

Mrs. Mercado cried:

'But of course he did! It stands to reason! Why——' She stopped and said more slowly, 'Anything else would be incredible!'

'You are doubtless correct, madame,' said Poirot with a bow. 'I explain to you only how the matter must be approached. First I assure myself of the fact that every one in this room is innocent. After that I seek the murderer elsewhere.'

'Is it not possible that that may be a little late in the day?' asked Father Lavigny suavely.

'The tortoise, *mon père*, overtook the hare.'

Father Lavigny shrugged his shoulders.

'We are in your hands,' he said resignedly. 'Convince yourself as soon as may be of our innocence in this terrible business.'

'As rapidly as possible. It was my duty to make the position clear to you, so that you may not resent the impertinence of any questions I may have to ask. Perhaps, *mon père*, the Church will set an example?'

'Ask any questions you please of me,' said Father Lavigny gravely.

'This is your first season out here?'

'Yes.'

'And you arrived—when?'

'Three weeks ago almost to a day. That is, on the 27th of February.'

'Coming from?'

'The Order of the *Pères Blancs* at Carthage.'

'Thank you, *mon père*. Were you at any time acquainted with Mrs. Leidner before coming here?'

'No, I had never seen the lady until I met her here.'

'Will you tell me what you were doing at the time of the tragedy?'

'I was working on some cuneiform tablets in my own room.'

I noticed that Poirot had at his elbow a rough plan of the building.

'That is the room at the south-west corner corresponding to that of Mrs. Leidner on the opposite side?'

'Yes.'

‘At what time did you go to your room?’

‘Immediately after lunch. I should say at about twenty minutes to one.’

‘And you remained there until—when?’

‘Just before three o’clock. I had heard the station wagon come back—and then I heard it drive off again. I wondered why, and came out to see.’

‘During the time that you were there did you leave the room at all?’

‘No, not once.’

‘And you heard or saw nothing that might have any bearing on the tragedy?’

‘No.’

‘You have no window giving on the courtyard in your room?’

‘No, both the windows give on the countryside.’

‘Could you hear at all what was happening in the courtyard?’

‘Not very much. I heard Mr. Emmott passing my room and going up to the roof. He did so once or twice.’

‘Can you remember at what time?’

‘No, I’m afraid I can’t. I was engrossed in my work, you see.’

There was a pause and then Poirot said:

‘Can you say or suggest anything at all that might throw light on this business? Did you, for instance, notice anything in the days preceding the murder?’

Father Lavigny looked slightly uncomfortable.

He shot a half-questioning look at Dr. Leidner.

‘That is rather a difficult question, monsieur,’ he said gravely. ‘If you ask me I must reply frankly that in my opinion Mrs. Leidner was clearly in dread of some one or something. She was definitely nervous about strangers. I imagine she had a reason for this nervousness of hers—but I *know* nothing. She did not confide in me.’

Poirot cleared his throat and consulted some notes that he held in his hand. ‘Two nights ago I understand there was a scare of burglary.’

Father Lavigny replied in the affirmative and retailed his story of the light seen in the antika-room and the subsequent futile search.

‘You believe, do you not, that some unauthorised person was on the premises at that time?’

‘I don’t know what to think,’ said Father Lavigny frankly. ‘Nothing was taken or disturbed in any way. It might have been one of the house-boys—’

‘Or a member of the expedition?’

‘Or a member of the expedition. But in that case there would be no reason for the person not admitting the fact.’

‘But it *might* equally have been a stranger from outside?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Supposing a stranger *had* been on the premises, could he have concealed himself successfully during the following day and until the afternoon of the day following that?’

He asked the question half of Father Lavigny and half of Dr. Leidner. Both men considered the question carefully.

‘I hardly think it would be possible,’ said Dr. Leidner at last with some reluctance. ‘I don’t see where he could possibly conceal himself, do you, Father Lavigny?’

‘No—no—I don’t.’

Both men seemed reluctant to put the suggestion aside.

Poirot turned to Miss Johnson.

‘And you, mademoiselle? Do you consider such a hypothesis feasible?’

After a moment’s thought Miss Johnson shook her head.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t. Where could any one hide? The bedrooms are all in use and, in any case, are sparsely furnished. The dark-room, the drawing-office and the laboratory were all in use the next day—so were all these rooms. There are no cupboards or corners. Perhaps, if the servants were in collusion——’

‘That is possible, but unlikely,’ said Poirot.

He turned once more to Father Lavigny.

‘There is another point. The other day Nurse Leatheran here noticed you talking to a man outside. She had previously noticed that same man trying to peer in at one of the windows on the outside. It rather looks as though the man were hanging round the place deliberately.’

‘That is possible, of course,’ said Father Lavigny thoughtfully.

‘Did you speak to this man first, or did he speak to you?’

Father Lavigny considered for a moment or two.

‘I believe—yes, I am sure, that he spoke to me.’

‘What did he say?’

Father Lavigny made an effort of memory.

‘He said, I think, something to the effect was this the American expedition house? And then something else about the Americans employing a lot of men on the work. I did not really understand

him very well, but I endeavoured to keep up a conversation so as to improve my Arabic. I thought, perhaps, that being a townee he would understand me better than the men on the dig do.'

'Did you converse about anything else?'

'As far as I remember, I said Hassanieh was a big town—and we then agreed that Baghdad was bigger—and I think he asked whether I was an Armenian or a Syrian Catholic—something of that kind.'

Poirot nodded.

'Can you describe him?'

Again Father Lavigny frowned in thought.

'He was rather a short man,' he said at last, 'and squarely built. He had a very noticeable squint and was of fair complexion.'

Mr. Poirot turned to me.

'Does that agree with the way you would describe him?' he asked.

'Not exactly,' I said hesitatingly. 'I should have said he was tall rather than short, and very dark complexioned. He seemed to me of a rather slender build. I didn't notice any squint.'

Mr. Poirot gave a despairing shrug of the shoulders.

'It is always so! If you were of the police how well you would know it! The description of the same man by two different people—never does it agree. Every detail is contradicted.'

'I'm fairly sure about the squint,' said Father Lavigny. 'Nurse Leatheran may be right about the other points. By the way, when I said *fair*, I only meant fair for an *Iraqi*. I expect nurse would call that dark.'

'Very dark,' I said obstinately. 'A dirty dark-yellow colour.'

I saw Dr. Reilly bite his lip and smile.

Poirot threw up his hands.

'*Passons!*' he said. 'This stranger hanging about, he may be important—he may not. At any rate he must be found. Let us continue our inquiry.'

He hesitated for a minute, studying the faces turned towards him round the table, then, with a quick nod, he singled out Mr. Reiter.

'Come, my friend,' he said. 'Let us have your account of yesterday afternoon.'

Mr. Reiter's pink, plump face flushed scarlet.

'Me?' he said.

'Yes, you. To begin with, your name and your age?'

'Carl Reiter, twenty-eight.'

'American—yes?'

'Yes, I come from Chicago.'

'This is your first season?'

'Yes. I'm in charge of the photography.'

'Ah, yes. And yesterday afternoon, how did you employ yourself?'

'Well—I was in the dark-room most of the time.'

'Most of the time—eh?'

'Yes. I developed some plates first. Afterwards I was fixing up some objects to photograph.'

'Outside?'

'Oh no, in the photographic room.'

'The dark-room opens out of the photographic room?'

'Yes.'

'And so you never came outside the photographic room?'

'No.'

'Did you notice anything that went on in the courtyard?'

The young man shook his head.

'I wasn't noticing anything,' he explained. 'I was busy. I heard the car come back, and as soon as I could leave what I was doing I came out to see if there was any mail. It was then that I—heard.'

'And you began your work in the photographic room—when?'

'At ten minutes to one.'

'Were you acquainted with Mrs. Leidner before you joined this expedition?'

The young man shook his head.

'No, sir. I never saw her till I actually got here.'

'Can you think of *anything*—any incident—however small—that might help us?'

Carl Reiter shook his head.

He said helplessly:

'I guess I don't know anything at all, sir.'

'Mr. Emmott?'

David Emmott spoke clearly and concisely in his pleasant soft American voice.

'I was working with the pottery from a quarter to one till a quarter to three—overseeing the boy Abdullah, sorting it, and occasionally going up to the roof to help Dr. Leidner.'

'How often did you go up to the roof?'

'Four times, I think.'

'For how long?'

'Usually a couple of minutes—not more. But on one occasion after

I'd been working a little over half an hour I stayed as long as ten minutes—discussing what to keep and what to fling away.'

'And I understand that when you came down you found the boy had left his place?'

'Yes. I called him angrily and he reappeared from outside the archway. He had gone out to gossip with the others.'

'That was the only time he left his work?'

'Well, I sent him up once or twice to the roof with pottery.'

Poirot said gravely:

'It is hardly necessary to ask you, Mr. Emmott, whether you saw any one enter or leave Mrs. Leidner's room during that time?'

Mr. Emmott replied promptly.

'I saw no one at all. Nobody even came out into the courtyard during the two hours I was working.'

'And to the best of your belief it was half-past one when both you and the boy were absent and the courtyard was empty?'

'It couldn't have been far off that time. Of course, I can't say *exactly*.'

Poirot turned to Dr. Reilly.

'That agrees with your estimate of the time of death, doctor?'

'It does,' said Dr. Reilly.

Mr. Poirot stroked his great curled moustaches.

'I think we can take it,' he said gravely, 'that Mrs. Leidner met her death during that ten minutes.'

CHAPTER XIV

ONE OF US?

THERE WAS a little pause—and in it a wave of horror seemed to float round the room.

I think it was at that moment that I first believed Dr. Reilly's theory to be right.

I *felt* that the murderer was in the room. Sitting with us—listening. *One of us*. . .

Perhaps Mrs. Mercado felt it too. For she suddenly gave a short sharp cry.

'I can't help it,' she sobbed. 'I—it's so *terrible*!'

'Courage, Marie,' said her husband.

He looked at us apologetically.

'She is so sensitive. She feels things so much.'

'I—I was so fond of Louise,' sobbed Mrs. Mercado.

I don't know whether something of what I felt showed in my face, but I suddenly found that Mr. Poirot was looking at me, and that a slight smile hovered on his lips.

I gave him a cold glance, and at once he resumed his inquiry.

'Tell me, madame,' he said, 'of the way you spent yesterday afternoon?'

'I was washing my hair,' sobbed Mrs. Mercado. 'It seems awful not to have known anything about it. I was quite happy and busy.'

'You were in your room?'

'Yes.'

'And you did not leave it?'

'No. Not till I heard the car. Then I came out and I heard what had happened. Oh, it was *awful*!'

'Did it surprise you?'

Mrs. Mercado stopped crying. Her eyes opened resentfully.

'What do you mean, M. Poirot? Are you suggesting——?'

'What should I mean, madame? You have just told us how fond you were of Mrs. Leidner. She might, perhaps, have confided in you.'

'Oh, I see. . . . No—no, dear Louise never told me anything—anything *definite*, that is. Of course, I could see she was terribly worried and nervous. And there were those strange occurrences—hands tapping on the window and all that.'

'Fancies, I remember you said,' I put in, unable to keep silent.

I was glad to see that she looked momentarily disconcerted.

Once again I was conscious of Mr. Poirot's amused eye glancing in my direction.

He summed up in a business-like way.

'It comes to this, madame, you were washing your hair—you heard nothing and you saw nothing. Is there anything at all you can think of that would be a help to us in any way?'

Mrs. Mercado took no time to think.

'No, indeed there isn't. It's the deepest mystery! But I should say there is no doubt—no doubt *at all* that the murderer came from outside. Why, it stands to reason.'

Poirot turned to her husband.

'And you, monsieur, what have you to say?'

Mr. Mercado started nervously. He pulled at his beard in an aimless fashion.

'Must have been. Must have been,' he said. 'Yet how could any one wish to harm her? She was so gentle—so kind——' He shook his head. 'Whoever killed her must have been a fiend—yes, a fiend!'

'And you yourself, monsieur, how did you pass yesterday afternoon?'

'I?' he stared vaguely.

'You were in the laboratory, Joseph,' his wife prompted him.

'Ah, yes, so I was—so I was. My usual tasks.'

'At what time did you go there?'

Again he looked helplessly and inquiringly at Mrs. Mercado.

'At ten minutes to one, Joseph.'

'Ah, yes, at ten minutes to one.'

'Did you come out in the courtyard at all?'

'No—I don't think so.' He considered. 'No, I am sure I didn't.'

'When did you hear of the tragedy?'

'My wife came and told me. It was terrible—shocking. I could hardly believe it. Even now, I can hardly believe it is true.'

Suddenly he began to tremble.

'It is horrible—horrible . . .'

Mrs. Mercado came quickly to his side.

'Yes, yes, Joseph, we all feel that. But we mustn't give way. It makes it so much more difficult for poor Dr. Leidner.'

I saw a spasm of pain pass across Dr. Leidner's face, and I guessed that this emotional atmosphere was not easy for him. He gave a half glance at Poirot as though in appeal. Poirot responded quickly.

'Miss Johnson?' he said.

'I'm afraid I can tell you very little,' said Miss Johnson. Her cultured well-bred voice was soothing after Mrs. Mercado's shrill treble. She went on:

'I was working in the living-room—taking impressions of some cylinder seals on plasticine.'

'And you saw or noticed nothing?'

'No.'

Poirot gave her a quick glance. His ear had caught what mine had—a faint note of indecision.

'Are you quite sure, mademoiselle? Is there something that comes back to you vaguely?'

'No—not really——'

'Something you saw, shall we say, out of the corner of your eye hardly knowing you saw it.'

'No, certainly not,' she replied positively.

'Something you *heard* then. Ah, yes, something you are not quite sure whether you heard or not?'

Miss Johnson gave a short vexed laugh.

'You press me very closely, M. Poirot. I'm afraid you are encouraging me to tell you what I am, perhaps, only imagining.'

'Then there *was* something you—shall we say—imagined?'

Miss Johnson said slowly, weighing her words in a detached way:

'I have imagined—since—that at some time during the afternoon I heard a very faint cry. . . . What I mean is that I dare say I *did* hear a cry. All the windows in the living-room were open and one hears all sorts of sounds from people working in the barley fields. But you see—since—I've got the idea into my head that it was—that it was Mrs. Leidner I heard. And that's made me rather unhappy. Because if I'd jumped up and run along to her room—well, who knows? I might have been in time . . .'

Dr. Reilly interposed authoritatively.

'Now, don't start getting that into your head,' he said. 'I've no doubt but that Mrs. Leidner (forgive me, Leidner) was struck down almost as soon as the man entered the room, and it was that blow that killed her. No second blow was struck. Otherwise she would have had time to call for help and make a real outcry.'

'Still, I might have caught the murderer,' said Miss Johnson.

'What time was this, mademoiselle?' asked Poirot. 'In the neighbourhood of half-past one?'

'It must have been about that time—yes.' She reflected a minute.

'That would fit in,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'You heard nothing else—the opening or shutting of a door, for instance?'

Miss Johnson shook her head.

'No, I do not remember anything of that kind.'

'You were sitting at a table, I presume. Which way were you facing? The courtyard? The antika-room? The verandah? Or the open countryside?'

'I was facing the courtyard.'

'Could you see the boy Abdullah washing pots from where you were?'

'Oh, yes, if I looked up, but of course, I was very intent on what I was doing. All my attention was on that.'

'If any one had passed the courtyard window, though, you would have noticed it?'

'Oh, yes, I am almost sure of that.'

'And nobody did so?'

'No.'

'But if any one had walked, say, across the middle of the courtyard, would you have noticed that?'

'I think—probably not—unless, as I say before, I had happened to look up and out of the window.'

'You did not notice the boy Abdullah leave his work and go out to join the other servants?'

'No.'

'Ten minutes,' mused Poirot. 'That fatal ten minutes.'

There was a momentary silence.

Miss Johnson lifted her head suddenly and said:

'You know, M. Poirot, I think I have unintentionally misled you. On thinking it over, I do not believe that I could possibly have heard any cry uttered in Mrs. Leidner's room from where I was. The antika-room lay between me and her—and I understand her windows were found closed.'

'In any case, do not distress yourself, mademoiselle,' said Poirot kindly. 'It is not really of much importance.'

'No, of course not. I understand that. But you see, it *is* of importance to me, because I feel I might have done something.'

'Don't distress yourself, dear Anne,' said Dr. Leidner with affection. 'You must be sensible. What you heard was probably one Arab bawling to another some distance away in the fields.'

Miss Johnson flushed a little at the kindness of his tone. I even saw tears spring to her eyes. She turned her head away and spoke even more gruffly than usual.

'Probably was. Usual thing after a tragedy—start imagining things that aren't so at all.'

Poirot was once more consulting his notebook.

'I do not suppose there is much more to be said. Mr. Carey?'

Richard Carey spoke slowly—in a wooden, mechanical manner.

'I'm afraid I can add nothing helpful. I was on duty at the dig. The news was brought to me there.'

'And you know or can think of nothing helpful that occurred in the days immediately preceding the murder?'

'Nothing at all.'

‘Mr. Coleman?’

‘I was right out of the whole thing,’ said Mr. Coleman with—was it just a shade of regret—in his tone. ‘I went into Hassanieh yesterday morning to get the money for the men’s wages. When I came back Emmott told me what had happened and I went back in the bus to get the police and Dr. Reilly.’

‘And beforehand?’

‘Well, sir, things were a bit jumpy—but you know that already. There was the antika-room scare and one or two before that—hands and faces at the window—you remember, sir,’ he appealed to Dr. Leidner, who bent his head in assent. ‘I think, you know, that you’ll find some Johnny *did* get in from outside. Must have been an artful sort of beggar.’

Poirot considered him for a minute or two in silence.

‘You are an Englishman, Mr. Coleman?’ he asked at last.

‘That’s right sir. All British. See the trademark. Guaranteed genuine.’

‘This is your first season?’

‘Quite right.’

‘And you are passionately keen on archaeology?’

This description of himself seemed to cause Mr. Coleman some embarrassment. He got rather pink and shot the side look of a guilty schoolboy at Dr. Leidner.

‘Of course—it’s all very interesting,’ he stammered. ‘I mean—I’m not exactly a brainy chap . . .’

He broke off rather lamely. Poirot did not insist.

He tapped thoughtfully on the table with the end of his pencil and carefully straightened an inkpot that stood in front of him.

‘It seems then,’ he said, ‘that that is as near as we can get for the moment. If any one of you thinks of something that has for the time being slipped his or her memory do not hesitate to come to me with it. It will be well now, I think, for me to have a few words alone with Dr. Leidner and Dr. Reilly.’

It was the signal for a breaking up of the party. We all rose and filed out of the door. When I was half-way out, however, a voice recalled me.

‘Perhaps,’ said M. Poirot, ‘Nurse Leatheran will be so kind as to remain. I think her assistance will be valuable to us.’

I came back and resumed my seat at the table.

POIROT MAKES A SUGGESTION

DR. REILLY had risen from his seat. When every one had gone out he carefully closed the door. Then, with an inquiring glance at Poirot, he proceeded to shut the window giving on the courtyard. The others were already shut. Then he, too, resumed his seat at the table.

'*Bien!*' said Poirot. 'We are now private and undisturbed. We can speak freely. We have heard what the members of the expedition have to tell us and—— But yes, *ma soeur*, what is it that you think?'

I got rather red. There was no denying that the queer little man had sharp eyes. He'd seen the thought passing through my mind—I suppose my face *had* shown a bit too clearly what I was thinking!

'Oh, it's nothing——' I said hesitating.

'Come on, nurse,' said Dr. Reilly. 'Don't keep the specialist waiting.'

'It's nothing really,' I said hurriedly. 'It only just passed through my mind, so to speak, that perhaps even if any one did know or suspect something it wouldn't be easy to bring it out in front of everybody else—or even, perhaps, in front of Dr. Leidner.'

Rather to my astonishment, M. Poirot nodded his head in vigorous agreement.

'Precisely. Precisely. It is very just what you say there. But I will explain. That little reunion we have just had—it served a purpose. In England before the races you have a parade of the horses, do you not? They go in front of the grandstand so that every one may have an opportunity of seeing and judging them. That is the purpose of my little assembly. In the sporting phrase, I run my eye over the possible starters.'

Dr. Leidner cried out violently, 'I do not believe for one minute that *any* member of my expedition is implicated in this crime!'

Then, turning to me, he said authoritatively:

'Nurse, I should be much obliged if you would tell M. Poirot here and now exactly what passed between my wife and you two days ago.'

Thus urged, I plunged straight away into my story, trying as far as possible to recall the exact words and phrases Mrs. Leidner had used. When I had finished, M. Poirot said:

'Very good. Very good. You have the mind neat and orderly. You will be of great service to me here.'

He turned to Dr. Leidner.

'You have these letters?'

'I have them here. I thought that you would want to see them first thing.'

Poirot took them from him, read them, and scrutinised them carefully as he did so. I was rather disappointed that he didn't dust powder over them or examine them with a microscope or anything like that—but I realised that he wasn't a very young man and that his methods were probably not very up to date. He just read them in the way that any one might read a letter.

Having read them he put them down and cleared his throat.

'Now,' he said, 'let us proceed to get our facts clear and in order. The first of these letters was received by your wife shortly after her marriage to you in America. There had been others but these she destroyed. The first letter was followed by a second. A very short time after the second arrived you both had a near escape from coal gas poisoning. You then came abroad and for nearly two years no further letters were received. They started again at the beginning of your season this year—that is to say within the last three weeks. That is correct?'

'Absolutely.'

'Your wife displayed every sign of panic and, after consulting Dr. Reilly, you engaged Nurse Leatheran here to keep your wife company and allay her fears?'

'Yes.'

'Certain incidents occurred—hands tapping at the window—a spectral face—noises in the antika-room. You did not witness any of these phenomena yourself?'

'No.'

'In fact nobody did except Mrs. Leidner?'

'Father Lavigny saw a light in the antika-room.'

'Yes, I have not forgotten that.'

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

'Had your wife made a will?'

'I do not think so.'

'Why was that?'

'It did not seem worth it from her point of view.'

'Is she not a wealthy woman?'

'Yes, during her lifetime. Her father left her a considerable sum of money in trust. She could not touch the principal. At her death it

was to pass to any children she might have—and failing children to the Pittstown Museum.'

Poirot drummed thoughtfully on the table.

'Then we can, I think,' he said, 'eliminate one motive from the case. It is, you comprehend, what I look for first. *Who benefits by the deceased's death?* In this case it is a museum. Had it been otherwise, had Mrs. Leidner died intestate but possessed of a considerable fortune, I should imagine that it would prove an interesting question as to who inherited the money—you—or a former husband. But there would have been this difficulty, the former husband would have had to resurrect himself in order to claim it, and I should imagine that he would then be in danger of arrest, though I hardly fancy that the death penalty would be exacted so long after the war. However, these speculations need not arise. As I say, I settle first the question of money. For the next step I proceed always to suspect the husband or wife of the deceased! In this case, in the first place, you are proved never to have gone near your wife's room yesterday afternoon, in the second place, you lose instead of gain by your wife's death, and in the third place——'

He paused.

'Yes?' said Dr. Leidner.

'In the third place,' said Poirot slowly. 'I can, I think, appreciate devotion when I see it. I believe, Dr. Leidner, that your love for your wife was the ruling passion of your life. It is so, is it not?'

Dr. Leidner answered quite simply:

'Yes.'

Poirot nodded.

'Therefore,' he said, 'we can proceed.'

'Hear, hear, let's get down to it,' said Dr. Reilly with some impatience.

Poirot gave him a reproving glance.

'My friend, do not be impatient. In a case like this everything must be approached with order and method. In fact, that is my rule in every case. Having disposed of certain possibilities, we now approach a very important point. It is vital that, as you say—all the cards should be on the table—there must be nothing kept back.'

'Quite so,' said Dr. Reilly.

'That is why I demand the whole truth,' went on Poirot.

Dr. Leidner looked at him in surprise.

'I assure you, M. Poirot, that I have kept nothing back. I have told you everything that I know. There have been no reserves.'

'Tout de même, you have not told me everything.'

'Yes, indeed. I cannot think of any detail that has escaped me.'

He looked quite distressed.

Poirot shook his head gently.

'No,' he said. *'You have not told me, for instance, why you installed Nurse Leatheran in the house.'*

Dr. Leidner looked completely bewildered.

'But I have explained that. It is obvious. My wife's nervousness—her fears . . .'

Poirot leaned forward. Slowly and emphatically he wagged a finger up and down.

'No, no, no. There is something there that is not clear. Your wife is in danger, yes—she is threatened with death, yes. You send—not for the police—not for a private detective even—but for a nurse! It does not make the sense, that!'

'I—I——' Dr. Leidner stopped. The colour rose in his cheeks. 'I thought——' He came to a dead stop.

'Now we are coming to it.' Poirot encouraged him. 'You thought—what?'

Dr. Leidner remained silent. He looked harassed and unwilling.

'See you,' Poirot's tone became winning and appealing, 'it all rings true what you have told me, *except for that*. Why a nurse? There is an answer—yes. In fact, there can be only one answer. *You did not believe yourself in your wife's danger.*'

And then with a cry Dr. Leidner broke down.

'God help me,' he groaned. 'I didn't. I didn't.'

Poirot watched him with the kind of attention a cat gives a mouse-hole—ready to pounce when the mouse shows itself.

'What *did* you think then?' he asked.

'I don't know. I don't know . . .'

'But you do know. You know perfectly. Perhaps I can help you—with a guess. *Did you, Dr. Leidner, suspect that these letters were all written by your wife herself?*'

There wasn't any need for him to answer. The truth of Poirot's guess was only too apparent. The horrified hand he held up, as though begging for mercy, told its own tale.

I drew a deep breath. So I *had* been right in my half-formed guess!

I recalled the curious tone in which Dr. Leidner had asked me what I thought of it all. I nodded my head slowly and thoughtfully, and suddenly awoke to the fact that M. Poirot's eyes were on me.

'Did you think the same, nurse?'

'The idea did cross my mind.' I said truthfully.

'For what reason?'

I explained the similarity of the handwriting on the letter that Mr. Coleman had shown me.

Poirot turned to Dr. Leidner.

'Had you, too, noticed that similarity?'

Dr. Leidner bowed his head.

'Yes, I did. The writing was small and cramped—not big and generous like Louise's, but several of the letters were formed the same way. I will show you.'

From an inner breast pocket he took out some letters and finally selected a sheet from one which he handed to Poirot. It was part of a letter written to him by his wife. Poirot compared it carefully with the anonymous letters.

'Yes,' he murmured. 'Yes. There are several similarities—a curious way of forming the letter *s*, a distinctive *e*. I am not a handwriting expert—I cannot pronounce definitely (and for that matter, I have never found two handwriting experts who agree on any point whatsoever)—but one can at least say this—the similarity between the two handwritings is very marked. It seems highly probable that they were all written by the same person. But it is not *certain*. We must take all contingencies into mind.'

He leaned back in his chair and said thoughtfully:

'There are three possibilities. First, the similarity of the handwriting is pure coincidence. Second, that these threatening letters were written by Mrs. Leidner herself for some obscure reason. Third, that they were written by some one *who deliberately copied her handwriting*. Why? There seems no sense in it. One of these three possibilities must be the correct one.'

He reflected for a minute or two and then, turning to Dr. Leidner, he asked, with a resumption of his brisk manner.

'When the possibility that Mrs. Leidner herself was the author of these letters first struck you, what theory did you form?'

Dr. Leidner shook his head.

'I put the idea out of my head as quickly as possible. I felt it was monstrous.'

‘Did you search for no explanation?’

‘Well,’ he hesitated, ‘I wonder if worrying and brooding over the past had perhaps affected my wife’s brain slightly. I thought she might possibly have written those letters to herself without being conscious of having done so. That is possible, isn’t it?’ he added, turning to Dr. Reilly.

Dr. Reilly pursed up his lips.

‘The human brain is capable of almost anything,’ he replied vaguely.

But he shot a lightning glance at Poirot, and as if in obedience to it, the latter abandoned the subject.

‘The letters are an interesting point,’ he said. ‘But we must concentrate on the case as a whole. There are, as I see it, three possible solutions.’

‘Three?’

‘Yes. Solution one: the simplest. Your wife’s first husband is still alive. He first threatens her and then proceeds to carry out his threats. If we accept this solution, our problem is to discover how he got in or out without being seen.

‘Solution two: Mrs. Leidner, for reasons of her own (reasons probably more easily understood by a medical man than a layman), writes herself threatening letters. The gas business is staged by her (remember, it was she who roused you by telling you she smelt gas). But, *if Mrs. Leidner wrote herself the letters, she cannot be in danger from the supposed writer.* We must, therefore, look elsewhere for the murderer. We must look, in fact, amongst the members of your staff. Yes,’ in answer to a murmur of protest from Dr. Leidner, ‘that is the only logical conclusion. To satisfy a private grudge one of them killed her. That person, I may say, was probably aware of the letters—or was at any rate aware that Mrs. Leidner feared or was pretending to fear some one. That fact, in the murderer’s opinion, rendered the murder quite safe for him. He felt sure it would be put down to a mysterious outsider—the writer of the threatening letters.

‘A variant of this solution is that the murderer actually wrote the letters himself, being aware of Mrs. Leidner’s past history. But in that case it is not quite clear *why* the criminal should have copied Mrs. Leidner’s own handwriting since, as far as we can see, it would be more to his or her advantage that they should appear to be written by an outsider.

'The third solution is the most interesting to my mind. I suggest that the letters are genuine. They are written by Mrs. Leidner's first husband (or his younger brother), *who is actually one of the expedition staff.*'

CHAPTER XVI

THE SUSPECTS

DR. LEIDNER sprang to his feet.

'Impossible! Absolutely impossible! The idea is absurd!'

Mr. Poirot looked at him quite calmly but said nothing.

'You mean to suggest that my wife's former husband is one of the expedition *and that she didn't recognise him?*'

'Exactly. Reflect a little on the facts. Nearly twenty years ago your wife lived with this man for a few months. Would she know him if she came across him after that lapse of time? I think not. His face will have changed, his build will have changed—his voice may not have changed so much, but that is a detail he can attend to himself. And remember, *she is not looking for him amongst her own household.* She visualises him as somewhere *outside*—a stranger. No, I do not think she would recognise him. And there is a second possibility. The young brother—the child of those days who was so passionately devoted to his elder brother. He is now a man. Will she recognise a child of ten or twelve years old in a man nearing thirty? Yes, there is young William Bosner to be reckoned with. Remember, his brother in his eyes may not loom as a traitor but as a patriot, a martyr for his own country—Germany. In his eyes *Mrs. Leidner* is the traitor—the monster who sent his beloved brother to death! A susceptible child is capable of great hero worship, and a young mind can easily be obsessed by an idea which persists into adult life.'

'Quite true,' said Dr. Reilly. 'The popular view that a child forgets easily is not an accurate one. Many people go right through life in the grip of an idea which has been impressed on them in very tender years.'

'*Bien.* You have these two possibilities. Frederick Bosner, a man by now of fifty odd, and William Bosner, whose age would be something short of thirty. Let us examine the members of your staff from these two points of view.'

'This is fantastic,' murmured Dr. Leidner. 'My staff! The members of my own expedition.'

'And consequently considered above suspicion,' said Poirot dryly. 'A very useful point of view. *Commençons!* Who could emphatically *not* be Frederick or William?'

'The women.'

'Naturally. Miss Johnson and Mrs. Mercado are crossed off. Who else?'

'Carey. He and I have worked together for years before I even met Louise——'

'And also he is the wrong age. He is, I should judge, thirty-eight or nine, too young for Frederick, too old for William. Now for the rest. There is Father Lavigny and Mr. Mercado. Either of them might be Frederick Bosner.'

'But, my dear sir,' cried Dr. Leidner in a voice of mingled irritation and amusement, 'Father Lavigny is known all over the world as an epigraphist and Mercado has worked for years in a well-known museum in New York. It is *impossible* that either of them should be the man you think!'

Poirot waved an airy hand.

'Impossible—impossible—I take no account of the word! The impossible, always I examine it very closely! But we will pass on for the moment. Who else have you? Carl Reiter, a young man with a German name, David Emmott——'

'He has been with me two seasons, remember.'

'He is a young man with the gift of patience. *If* he committed a crime, it would not be in a hurry. All would be very well prepared.'

Dr. Leidner made a gesture of despair.

'And lastly, William Coleman,' continued Poirot.

'He is an Englishman.'

'*Pourquoi pas?* Did not Mrs. Leidner say that the boy left America and could not be traced? He might easily have been brought up in England.'

'You have an answer to everything,' said Dr. Leidner.

I was thinking hard. Right from the beginning I had thought Mr. Coleman's manner rather more like a P. G. Wodehouse book than like a real live young man. Had he really been playing a part all the time?

Poirot was writing in a little book.

'Let us proceed with order and method,' he said. 'On the first count

we have two names. Father Lavigny and Mr. Mercado. On the second we have Coleman, Emmott and Reiter.

'Now let us pass to the opposite aspect of the matter—means and opportunity. *Who amongst the expedition had the means and the opportunity of committing the crime?* Carey was on the dig, Coleman was in Hassanieh, you yourself were on the roof. That leaves us Father Lavigny, Mr. Mercado, Mrs. Mercado, David Emmott, Carl Reiter, Miss Johnson and Nurse Leatheran.'

'Oh!' I exclaimed, and I bounded in my chair.

Mr. Poirot looked at me with twinkling eyes.

'Yes, I'm afraid, *ma soeur*, that you have got to be included. It would have been quite easy for you to have gone along and killed Mrs. Leidner while the courtyard was empty. You have plenty of muscle and strength, and she would have been quite unsuspecting until the moment the blow was struck.'

I was so upset that I couldn't get a word out. Dr. Reilly, I noticed, was looking highly amused.

'Interesting case of a nurse who murdered her patients one by one,' he murmured.

Such a look as I gave him!

Dr. Leidner's mind had been running on a different tack.

'Not Emmott, M. Poirot,' he objected. 'You can't include him. He was on the roof with me, remember, during that ten minutes.'

'Nevertheless we cannot exclude him. He could have come down, gone straight to Mrs. Leidner's room, killed her, and *then* called the boy back. Or he might have killed her on one of the occasions when he had *sent the boy up to you*.'

Dr. Leidner shook his head, murmuring:

'What a nightmare! It's all so—fantastic.'

To my surprise Poirot agreed.

'Yes, that is true. *This is a fantastic crime*. One does not often come across them. Usually murder is very sordid—very simple. But this is unusual murder . . . I suspect, Dr. Leidner, that your wife was an unusual woman'

He had hit the nail on the head with such accuracy that I jumped.

'Is that true, nurse?' he asked.

Dr. Leidner said quietly:

'Tell him what Louise was like, nurse. You are unprejudiced.'

I spoke quite frankly.

'She was very lovely,' I said. 'You couldn't help admiring her and wanting to do things for her. I've never met any one like her before.'

'Thank you,' said Dr. Leidner and smiled at me.

'That is valuable testimony coming from an outsider,' said Poirot politely. 'Well, let us proceed. Under the heading of *means and opportunity* we have seven names. Nurse Leatheran, Miss Johnson, Mrs. Mercado, Mr. Mercado, Mr. Reiter, Mr. Emmott and Father Lavigny.'

Once more he cleared his throat. I've always noticed that foreigners can make the oddest noises.

'Let us for the moment assume that our third theory is correct. That is that the murderer is Frederick or William Bosner, and that Frederick or William Bosner is a member of the expedition staff. By comparing both lists we can narrow down our suspects on this count to four. Father Lavigny, Mr. Mercado, Carl Reiter and David Emmott.'

'Father Lavigny is out of the question,' said Dr. Leidner with decision. 'He is one of the *Pères Blancs* in Carthage.'

'And his beard's quite real,' I put in.

'*Ma soeur*,' said Poirot, 'a murderer of the first class *never* wears a false beard!'

'How do you know the murderer is of the first class?' I asked rebelliously.

'Because if he were not, the whole truth would be plain to me at this instant—and it is not.'

That's pure conceit, I thought to myself.

'Anyway,' I said, reverting to the beard, 'it must have taken quite a time to grow.'

'That is a practical observation,' said Poirot.

Dr. Leidner said irritably:

'But it's ridiculous—quite ridiculous. Both he and Mercado are well-known men. They've been known for years.'

Poirot turned to him.

'You have not the true vision. You do not appreciate an important point. *If Frederick Bosner is not dead—what has he been doing all these years?* He must have taken a different name. He must have built himself up a career.'

'As a *Père Blanc*?' asked Dr. Reilly sceptically.

'It is a little fantastic that, yes,' confessed Poirot. 'But we cannot put it right out of court. Besides, there are other possibilities.'

'The young 'uns?' said Reilly. 'If you want my opinion, on the face of it there's only one of your suspects that's even plausible.'

'And that is?'

'Young Carl Reiter. There's nothing actually against him, but come down to it and you've got to admit a few things—he's the right age, he's got a German name, he's new this year and he had the opportunity all right. He's only got to pop out of his photographic place, cross the courtyard to do his dirty work and hare back again while the coast was clear. If any one were to have dropped into the photographic room while he was out of it, he can always say later that he was in the dark-room. I don't say he's your man but if you are going to suspect some one I say he's by far the most likely.'

M. Poirot didn't seem very receptive. He nodded gravely but doubtfully.

'Yes,' he said. 'He is the most plausible, but it may not be so simple as all that.'

Then he said:

'Let us say no more at present. I would like now if I may to examine the room where the crime took place.'

'Certainly.' Dr. Leidner fumbled in his pockets then looked at Dr. Reilly. 'Captain Maitland took it,' he said.

'Maitland gave it to me,' said Reilly. 'He had to go off on that Kurdish business.'

He produced the key.

Dr. Leidner said hesitatingly:

'Do you mind—if I don't—Perhaps, nurse—'

'Of course. Of course,' said Poirot. 'I quite understand. Never do I wish to cause you unnecessary pain. If you will be good enough to accompany me, *ma soeur*.'

'Certainly,' I said.

CHAPTER XVII

THE STAIN BY THE WASH-STAND

MRS. LEIDNER'S BODY had been taken to Hassanieh for the post-mortem, but otherwise her room had been left exactly as it was. There was so little in it that it had not taken the police long to go over it.

To the right of the door as you entered was the bed. Opposite the door were the two barred windows giving on the countryside. Between them was a plain oak table with two drawers that served Mrs. Leidner as a dressing-table. On the east wall there was a line of hooks with dresses hung up protected by cotton bags and a deal chest of drawers. Immediately to the left of the door was the wash-stand. In the middle of the room was a good-sized plain oak table with a blotter and ink-stand and a small attachè-case. It was in the latter that Mrs. Leidner had kept the anonymous letters. The curtains were short strips of native material—white striped with orange. The floor was of stone with some goatskin rugs on it, three narrow ones of brown striped with white in front of the two windows and the wash-stand, and a larger better quality one of white with brown stripes lying between the bed and the writing-table.

There were no cupboards or alcoves or long curtains—nowhere, in fact, where any one could have hidden. The bed was a plain iron one with a printed cotton quilt. The only trace of luxury in the room were three pillows all made of the best soft and billowy down. Nobody but Mrs. Leidner had pillows like these.

In a few brief dry words Dr. Reilly explained where Mrs. Leidner's body had been found—in a heap on the rug beside the bed.

To illustrate his account, he beckoned me to come forward.

'If you don't mind, nurse?' he said.

I'm not squeamish. I got down on the floor and arranged myself as far as possible in the attitude in which Mrs. Leidner's body had been found.

'Leidner lifted her head when he found her,' said the doctor. 'But I questioned him closely and it's obvious that he didn't actually change her position.'

'It seems quite straightforward,' said Poirot. 'She was lying on the bed, asleep or resting—some one opens the door, she looks up, rises to her feet——'

'And he struck her down,' finished the doctor. 'The blow would produce unconsciousness and death would follow very shortly. You see——'

He explained the injury in technical language.

'Not much blood, then?' said Poirot.

'No, the blood escaped internally into the brain.'

'*Eh bien.*' said Poirot, 'that seems straightforward enough—except for one thing. If the man who entered was a stranger, why did

not Mrs. Leidner cry out at once for help? If she had screamed she would have been heard. Nurse Leatheran here would have heard her, and Emmott and the boy.'

'That's easily answered,' said Dr. Reilly dryly. '*Because it wasn't a stranger.*'

Poirot nodded.

'Yes,' he said meditatively. 'She may have been *surprised* to see the person—but she was not *afraid*. Then, as he struck, she *may* have uttered a half cry—too late.'

'The cry Miss Johnson heard?'

'Yes, if she *did* hear it. But on the whole I doubt it. These mud walls are thick and the windows were closed.'

He stepped up to the bed.

'You left her actually lying down?' he asked me.

I explained exactly what I had done.

'Did she mean to sleep or was she going to read?'

'I gave her two books—a light one and a volume of memoirs. She usually read for a while and then sometimes dropped off for a short sleep.'

'And she was—what shall I say—quite as usual?'

I considered.

'Yes. She seemed quite normal and in good spirits,' I said. 'Just a shade off-hand, perhaps, but I put that down to her having confided in me the day before. It makes people a little uncomfortable sometimes.'

Poirot's eyes twinkled.

'Ah, yes, indeed, me, I know that well.'

He looked round the room.

'And when you came in here after the murder, was everything as you had seen it before?'

I looked round also.

'Yes, I think so. I don't remember anything being different.'

'There was no sign of the weapon with which she was struck?'

'No.'

Poirot looked at Dr. Reilly. 'What was it in your opinion?'

The doctor replied promptly.

'Something pretty powerful of a fair size and without any sharp corners or edges. The rounded base of a statue, say—something like that. Mind you, I'm not suggesting that that *was* it. But that type of thing. The blow was delivered with great force.'

‘Struck by a strong arm? A man’s arm?’

‘Yes—unless——’

‘Unless—what?’

Dr. Reilly said slowly:

‘It is just possible that Mrs. Leidner might have been on her knees—in which case, the blow being delivered from above with a heavy implement, the force needed would not have been so great.’

‘*On her knees,*’ mused Poirot. ‘It is an idea—that.’

‘It’s only an idea, mind,’ the doctor hastened to point out. ‘There’s absolutely nothing to indicate it.’

‘But it’s possible.’

‘Yes. And after all, in view of the circumstances, it’s not fantastic. Her fear might have led her to kneel in supplication rather than to scream when her instinct would tell her it was too late—that nobody could get there in time.’

‘Yes,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. ‘It is an idea . . .’

It was a very poor one, I thought. I couldn’t for one moment imagine Mrs. Leidner on her knees to any one.

Poirot made his way slowly round the room. He opened the windows, tested the bars, passed his head through and satisfied himself that by no means could his shoulders be made to follow his head.

‘The windows were shut when you found her,’ he said. ‘Were they also shut when you left her at a quarter to one?’

‘Yes, they were always shut in the afternoon. There is no gauze over these windows as there is in the living-room and dining-room. They are kept shut to keep out the flies.’

‘And in any case no one could get in that way,’ mused Poirot. ‘And the walls are of the most solid—mud-brick—and there are no trap-doors and no sky-lights. No, there is only one way into this room—*through the door*. And there is only one way to the door—*through the courtyard*. And there is only one entrance to the courtyard—*through the archway*. And outside the archway there were five people and they all tell the same story, and I do not think, me, that they are lying . . . No, they are not lying. They are not bribed to silence. The murderer was *here*. . . .’

I didn’t say anything. Hadn’t I felt the same thing just now when we were all cooped up round that table?

Slowly Poirot prowled round the room. He took up a photograph

from the chest of drawers. It was of an elderly man with a white goatee beard.

He looked inquiringly at me.

'Mrs. Leidner's father,' I said. 'She told me so.'

He put it down again and glanced over the articles on the dressing-table—all of plain tortoiseshell—simple but good. He looked up at a row of books in a shelf, repeating the titles aloud.

'Who were the Greeks? Introduction to Relativity. Life of Lady Hester Stanhope. Crewe Train. Back to Methuselah. Linda Condon. Yes, they tell us something, perhaps.

'She was not a fool, your Mrs. Leidner. She had a mind.'

'Oh! she was a *very* clever woman,' I said eagerly. 'Very well read and up in everything. She wasn't a bit ordinary.'

He smiled as he looked over at me.

'No,' he said. 'I've already realised that.'

He passed on. He stood for some moments at the wash-stand where there was a big array of bottles and toilet creams.

Then, suddenly, he dropped on his knees and examined the rug.

Dr. Reilly and I came quickly to join him. He was examining a small dark brown stain, almost invisible on the brown of the rug. In fact it was only just noticeable where it impinged on one of the white stripes.

'What do you say, doctor?' he said. 'Is that blood?'

Dr. Reilly knelt down.

'Might be,' he said. 'I'll make sure if you like.'

'If you would be so amiable.'

Mr. Poirot examined the jug and basin. The jug was standing on the side of the wash-stand. The basin was empty, but beside the wash-stand there was an empty kerosene tin containing slop water.

He turned to me.

'Do you remember, nurse? Was this jug *out* of the basin or *in* it when you left Mrs. Leidner at a quarter to one?'

'I can't be sure,' I said after a minute or two. 'I rather think it was standing in the basin.'

'Ah?'

'But you see,' I said hastily. 'I only think so because it usually was. The boys leave it like that after lunch. I just feel that if it hadn't been in I should have noticed it.'

He nodded quite appreciatively.

'Yes, I understand that. It is your hospital training. If everything

had not been just so in the room, you would quite unconsciously have set it to rights hardly noticing what you were doing. And after the murder? Was it like it is now?’

I shook my head.

‘I didn’t notice then,’ I said. ‘All I looked for was whether there was any place any one could be hidden or if there were anything the murderer had left behind him.’

‘It’s blood all right,’ said Dr. Reilly, rising from his knees. ‘Is it important?’

Poirot was frowning perplexedly. He flung out his hands with petulance.

‘I cannot tell. How can I tell? It may mean nothing at all. I can say, if I like, that the murderer touched her—that there was blood on his hands—very little blood, but still blood—and so he came over here and washed them. Yes, it may have been like that. But I cannot jump to conclusions and say that it *was* so. That stain may be of no importance at all.’

‘There would have been very little blood,’ said Dr. Reilly dubiously. ‘None would have spurted out or anything like that. It would have just oozed a little from the wound. Of course, if he’d probed it at all . . .’

I gave a shiver. A nasty sort of picture came up in my mind. The vision of somebody—perhaps that nice pig-faced photographic boy, striking down that lovely woman and then bending over her probing the wound with his finger in an awful gloating fashion and his face, perhaps, quite different . . . all fierce and mad . . .

Dr. Reilly noticed my shiver.

‘What’s the matter, nurse?’ he said.

‘Nothing—just goose-flesh,’ I said. ‘A goose walking over my grave.’

Mr. Poirot turned round and looked at me.

‘I know what you need,’ he said. ‘Presently when we have finished here and I go back with the doctor to Hassanieh we will take you with us. You will give Nurse Leatheran tea, will you not, doctor?’

‘Delighted.’

‘Oh, no doctor,’ I protested. ‘I couldn’t think of such a thing.’

M. Poirot gave me a little friendly tap on the shoulder. Quite an English tap, not a foreign one.

‘You, *ma soeur*, will do as you are told,’ he said. ‘Besides, it will be of advantage to me. There is a good deal more that I want to discuss,

and I cannot do it here where one must preserve the decencies. The good Dr. Leidner he worshipped his wife and he is sure—oh, so sure—that everybody else felt the same about her! But that, in my opinion, would not be human nature! No, we want to discuss Mrs. Leidner with—how do you say—the gloves removed? That is settled then. When we have finished here, we take you with us to Hassanieh.’

‘I suppose,’ I said doubtfully, ‘that I ought to be leaving anyway. It’s rather awkward.’

‘Do nothing for a day or two,’ said Dr. Reilly. ‘You can’t very well go until after the funeral.’

‘That’s all very well,’ I said. ‘And supposing *I* get murdered too, doctor?’

I said it half jokingly and Dr. Reilly took it in the same fashion and would, I think, have made some jocular response.

But M. Poirot, to my astonishment, stood stock still in the middle of the floor and clasped his hands to his head.

‘Ah! if that were possible,’ he murmured. ‘It is a danger—yes—a great danger—and what can one do? How can one guard against it?’

‘Why, M. Poirot,’ I said, ‘I was only joking! Who’d want to murder me, I should like to know?’

‘You—or another,’ he said, and I didn’t like the way he said it at all. Positively creepy.

‘But why?’ I persisted.

He looked at me very straight then.

‘I joke, mademoiselle,’ he said, and I laugh. *But there are some things that are no joke.* There are things that my profession has taught me. And one of these things, the most terrible thing, is this:

‘Murder is a habit . . .’

CHAPTER XVIII

TEA AT DR REILLY’S

BEFORE LEAVING, Poirot made a round of the expedition house and the outbuildings. He also asked a few questions of the servants at second hand—that is to say, Dr. Reilly translated the questions and answers from English into Arabic and vice versa.

These questions dealt mainly with the appearance of the stranger

Mrs. Leidner and I had seen looking through the window and to whom Father Lavigny had been talking on the following day.

'Do you really think that fellow had anything to do with it?' asked Dr. Reilly when we were bumping along in his car on our way to Hassanieh.

'I like all the information there is,' was Poirot's reply.

And really, that described his methods very well. I found later that there wasn't anything—no small scrap of insignificant gossip—in which he wasn't interested. Men aren't usually so gossipy.

I must confess I was glad of my cup of tea when we got to Dr. Reilly's house.

M. Poirot, I noticed, put five lumps of sugar in his.

Stirring it carefully with his teaspoon he said:

'And now we can talk, can we not? We can make up our minds who is likely to have committed the crime.'

'Lavigny, Mercado, Emmott or Reiter?' asked Dr. Reilly.

'No, no—that was theory number three. I wish to concentrate now on theory number two—leaving aside all question of a mysterious husband or brother-in-law turning up from the past. Let us discuss now quite simply which member of the expedition had the means and opportunity to kill Mrs. Leidner, and who is likely to have done so.'

'I thought you didn't think much of that theory.'

'Not at all. But I have some natural delicacy,' said Poirot reproachfully. 'Can I discuss in the presence of Dr. Leidner the motives likely to lead to the murder of his wife by a member of the expedition? That would not have been delicate at all. I had to sustain the fiction that his wife was adorable and that every one adored her!'

'But naturally it was not like that at all. Now we can be brutal and impersonal and say what we think. We have no longer to consider people's feelings. And that is where Nurse Leatheran is going to help us. She is, I am sure, a very good observer.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' I said.

Dr. Reilly handed me a plate of hot scones—'to fortify yourself,' he said. They were very good scones.

'Come now,' said M. Poirot in a friendly, chatty way. 'You shall tell me, *ma soeur*, exactly what each member of the expedition felt towards Mrs. Leidner.'

'I was only there a week, M. Poirot,' I said.

'Quite long enough for one of your intelligence. A nurse sums up

quickly. She makes her judgments and abides by them. Come, let us make a beginning. Father Lavigny, for instance?’

‘Well, there now, I really couldn’t say. He and Mrs. Leidner seemed to like talking together. But they usually spoke French and I’m not very good at French myself though I learnt it as a girl at school. I’ve an idea they talked mainly about books.’

‘They were, as you might say, companionable together—yes?’

‘Well, yes, you might put it that way. But, all the same, I think Father Lavigny was puzzled by her and—well—almost annoyed by being puzzled, if you know what I mean.’

And I told him of the conversation I had had with him out on the dig that first day when he had called Mrs. Leidner a ‘dangerous woman.’

‘Now that is very interesting,’ M. Poirot said. ‘And she—what do you think she thought of him?’

‘That’s rather difficult to say, too. It wasn’t easy to know what Mrs. Leidner thought of people. Sometimes, I fancy, *he* puzzled *her*. I remember her saying to Dr. Leidner that he was unlike any priest she had ever known.’

‘A length of hemp to be ordered for Father Lavigny,’ said Dr. Reilly facetiously.

‘My dear friend,’ said Poirot. ‘Have you not, perhaps, some patients to attend? I would not for the world detain you from your professional duties.’

‘I’ve got a whole hospital of them,’ said Dr. Reilly.

And he got up and said a wink was as good as a nod to a blind horse, and went out laughing.

‘That is better,’ said Poirot. ‘We will have now an interesting conversation *tête-à-tête*. But you must not forget to eat your tea.’

He passed me a plate of sandwiches and suggested my having a second cup of tea. He really had very pleasant, attentive manners.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘let us continue with your impressions. Who was there who in your opinion did *not* like Mrs. Leidner?’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘it’s only my opinion and I don’t want it repeated as coming from me.’

‘Naturally not.’

‘But in my opinion little Mrs. Mercado fairly hated her!’

‘Ah! And Mr. Mercado?’

‘He was a bit soft on her,’ I said. ‘I shouldn’t think women, apart from his wife, had ever taken much notice of him. And Mrs. Leidner

had a nice kind way of being interested in people and the things they told her. It rather went to the poor man's head, I fancy.'

'And Mrs. Mercado—she was not pleased?'

'She was just plain jealous—that's the truth of it. You've got to be very careful when there's a husband and wife about, and that's a fact. I could tell you some surprising things. You've no idea the extraordinary things women get into their heads when it's a question of their husbands.'

'I do not doubt the truth of what you say. So Mrs. Mercado was jealous? And she hated Mrs. Leidner?'

'I've seen her look at her as though she'd have liked to kill her—oh, gracious!' I pulled myself up. 'Indeed, M. Poirot, I didn't mean to say—I mean that is, not for one moment—'

'No, no. I quite understand. The phrase slipped out. A very convenient one. And Mrs. Leidner, was she worried by this animosity of Mrs. Mercado's?'

'Well,' I said reflecting, 'I don't really think she was worried at all. In fact, I don't even know whether she noticed it. I thought once of just giving her a hint—but I didn't like to. Least said soonest mended. That's what I say.'

'You are doubtless wise. Can you give me any instances of how Mrs. Mercado showed her feelings?'

I told him about our conversation on the roof.

'So she mentioned Mrs. Leidner's first marriage,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'Can you remember—in mentioning it—did she look at you as though she wondered whether you had heard a different version?'

'You think she may have known the truth about it?'

'It is a possibility. She may have written those letters—and engineered a tapping hand and all the rest of it.'

'I wondered something of the same kind myself. It seemed the kind of petty revengeful thing she might do.'

'Yes. A cruel streak, I should say. But hardly the temperament for cold-blooded brutal murder unless, of course—'

He paused and then said:

'It is odd, that curious thing she said to you. "*I know why you are here.*" What did she mean by it?'

'I can't imagine,' I said frankly.

'She thought you were there for some ulterior reason apart from the declared one. What reason? And why should she be so concerned

in the matter. Odd, too, the way you tell me she stared at you all through tea the day you arrived.'

'Well, she's not a lady, M. Poirot,' I said primly.

'That, *ma soeur*, is an excuse but not an explanation.'

I wasn't quite sure for the minute what he meant. But he went on quickly.

'And the other members of the staff?'

I considered.

'I don't think Miss Johnson liked Mrs. Leidner either very much. But she was quite open and above-board about it. She as good as admitted she was prejudiced. You see, she's very devoted to Dr. Leidner and had worked with him for years. And of course, marriage does change things—there's no denying it.'

'Yes,' said Poirot. 'And from Miss Johnson's point of view it would be an unsuitable marriage. It would really have been much more suitable if Dr. Leidner had married *her*.'

'It would really,' I agreed. 'But there, that's a man all over. Not one in a hundred considers suitability. And one can't really blame Dr. Leidner. Miss Johnson, poor soul, isn't so much to look at. Now Mrs. Leidner was really beautiful—not young, of course—but oh! I wish you'd known her. There was something about her. . . . I remember Mr. Coleman saying she was like a thingummyjig that came to lure people into marshes. That wasn't a very good way of putting it, but—oh, well—you'll laugh at me, but there *was* something about her that was—well—unearthly.'

'She could cast a spell—yes, I understand,' said Poirot.

'Then I don't think she and Mr. Carey got on very well either,' I went on. 'I've an idea *he* was jealous just like Miss Johnson. He was always very stiff with her and so was she with him. You know—she passed him things and was very polite and called him Mr. Carey rather formally. He was an old friend of her husband's, of course, and some women can't stand their husband's old friends. They don't like to think that any one knew them before they did—at least that's rather a muddled way of putting it—'

'I quite understand. And the three young men? Coleman, you say, was inclined to be poetic about her.'

I couldn't help laughing.

'It was funny, M. Poirot,' I said. 'He's such a matter-of-fact young man.'

'And the other two?'

'I don't really know about Mr. Emmott. He's always so quiet and never says much. She was very nice to him always. You know—friendly—called him David and used to tease him about Miss Reilly and things like that.'

'Ah, really? And did he enjoy that?'

'I don't quite know,' I said doubtfully. 'He'd just look at her. Rather funnily. You couldn't tell what he was thinking.'

'And Mr. Reiter?'

'She wasn't always very kind to him,' I said slowly. 'I think he got on her nerves. She used to say quite sarcastic things to him.'

'And did he mind?'

'He used to get very pink, poor boy. Of course, she didn't *mean* to be unkind.'

And then suddenly, from feeling a little sorry for the boy, it came over me that he was very likely a cold-blooded murderer and had been playing a part all the time.

'Oh, M. Poirot,' I exclaimed. 'What do you think *really* happened?'

He shook his head slowly and thoughtfully.

'Tell me,' he said. 'You are not afraid to go back there to-night?'

'Oh *no*,' I said. 'Of course, I remember what you said, but who would want to murder *me*?'

'I do not think that any one could,' he said slowly. 'That is partly why I have been so anxious to hear all you could tell me. No, I think—I am sure—you are quite safe.'

'If any one had told me in Baghdad——' I began and stopped.

'Did you hear any gossip about the Leidners and the expedition before you came here?' he asked.

I told him about Mrs. Leidner's nickname and just a little of what Mrs. Kelsey had said about her.

In the middle of it the door opened and Miss Reilly came in. She had been playing tennis and had her racquet in her hand.

I gathered Poirot had already met her when he arrived in Hassanieh.

She said how do you do to me in her usual off-hand manner and picked up a sandwich.

'Well, M. Poirot,' she said. 'How are you getting on with our local mystery?'

'Not very fast, mademoiselle.'

'I see you've rescued nurse from the wreck.'

'Nurse Leatheran has been giving me valuable information about the various members of the expedition. Incidentally I have learnt a

good deal—about the victim. And the victim, mademoiselle, is very often the clue to the mystery.'

Miss Reilly said:

'That's rather clever of you, M. Poirot. It's certainly true that if ever a woman deserved to be murdered Mrs. Leidner was that woman!'

'Miss Reilly!' I cried scandalised.

She laughed, a short, nasty laugh.

'Ah!' she said. 'I thought you hadn't been hearing quite the truth. Nurse Leatheran, I'm afraid, was quite taken in, like many other people. Do you know, M. Poirot, I rather hope that this case isn't going to be one of your successes. I'd quite like the murderer of Louise Leidner to get away with it. In fact, I wouldn't much have objected to putting her out of the way myself.'

I was simply disgusted with the girl. M. Poirot, I must say, didn't turn a hair. He just bowed and said quite pleasantly:

'I hope, then, that you have an alibi for yesterday afternoon?'

There was a moment's silence and Miss Reilly's racquet went clattering down on to the floor. She didn't bother to pick it up. Slack and untidy like all her sort! She said in a rather breathless voice:

'Oh, yes, I was playing tennis at the club. But, seriously, M. Poirot, I wonder if you know anything at all about Mrs. Leidner and the kind of woman she was?'

Again he made a funny little bow and said:

'You shall inform me, mademoiselle.'

She hesitated a minute and then spoke with a callousness and lack of decency that really sickened me.

'There's a convention that one doesn't speak ill of the dead. That's stupid, I think. The truth's always the truth. On the whole it's better to keep your mouth shut about living people. You might conceivably injure them. The dead are past that. But the harm they've done lives after them sometimes. Not quite a quotation from Shakespeare but very nearly! Has nurse told you of the queer atmosphere there was at Tell Yarimjah? Has she told you how jumpy they all were? And how they all used to glare at each other like enemies? That was Louise Leidner's doing. When I was a kid out here three years ago they were the happiest, jolliest lot imaginable. Even last year they were pretty well all right. But this year there was a blight over them—and it was *her* doing. She was the kind of woman who won't let anybody else be happy! There *are* women like that and she was one of them! She wanted to break up things always. Just for fun—or for the sense of

power—or perhaps just because she was made that way. And she was the kind of woman who had to get hold of every male creature within reach!’

‘Miss Reilly,’ I cried, ‘I don’t think that’s true. In fact I *know* it isn’t.’

She went on without taking the least notice of me.

‘It wasn’t enough for her to have her husband adore her. She had to make a fool of that long-legged shambling idiot of a Mercado. Then she got hold of Bill. Bill’s a sensible cove, but she was getting him all mazed and bewildered. Carl Reiter she just amused herself by tormenting. It was easy. He’s a sensitive boy. And she had a jolly good go at David.

‘David was better sport to her because he put up a fight. He felt her charm—but he wasn’t having any. I think because he’d got sense enough to know that she didn’t really care a damn. And that’s why I hate her so. She’s not sensual. She doesn’t *want* affairs. It’s just cold-blooded experiment on her part and the fun of stirring people up and setting them against each other. She dabbled in that too. She’s the sort of woman who’s never had a row with any one in her life—but rows always happen where she is! She *makes* them happen. She’s a kind of female Iago. She *must* have drama. But she doesn’t want to be involved *herself*. She’s always outside pulling strings—looking on—enjoying it. Oh, do you see *at all* what I mean?’

‘I see, perhaps, more than you know, mademoiselle,’ said Poirot.

I couldn’t make his voice out. He didn’t sound indignant. He sounded—oh, well, I can’t explain it.

Sheila Reilly seemed to understand for she flushed all over her face.

‘You can think what you choose,’ she said. ‘But I’m right about her. She was a clever woman and she was bored and she experimented—with people—like other people experiment with chemicals. She enjoyed working on poor old Johnson’s feelings and seeing her bite on the bullet and control herself like the old sport she is. She liked goading little Mercado into a white-hot frenzy. She liked flicking *me* on the raw—and she could do it too, every time! She liked finding out things about people and holding it over them. Oh, I don’t mean crude blackmail—I mean just letting them know that she *knew*—and leaving them uncertain what she meant to do about it. My God, though, that woman was an artist! There was nothing crude about *her* methods!’

'And her husband?' asked Poirot.

'She never wanted to hurt him,' said Miss Reilly slowly. 'I've never known her anything but sweet to him. I suppose she was fond of him. He's a dear—wrapped up in his own world—his digging and his theories. And he worshipped her and thought her perfection. That might have annoyed some women. It didn't annoy her. In a sense he lived in a fool's paradise—and yet it wasn't a fool's paradise because to him she was what he thought her. Though it's hard to reconcile that with——'

She stopped.

'Go on, mademoiselle,' said Poirot.

She turned suddenly on me.

'What have you said about Richard Carey?'

'About Mr. Carey?' I asked astonished.

'About her and Carey?'

'Well,' I said, 'I've mentioned that they didn't hit it off very well——'

To my surprise she broke into a fit of laughter.

'Didn't hit it off very well! You fool! He's head over ears in love with her. And it's tearing him to pieces—because he worships Leidner too. He's been his friend for years. That would be enough for her, of course. She's made it her business to come between them. But all the same I've fancied——'

'Eh, bien?'

She was frowning, absorbed in thought.

'I've fancied that she'd gone too far for once—that she was not only biter but bit! Carey's attractive. He's as attractive as hell. . . . She was a cold devil—but I believe she could have lost her coldness with him. . . .'

'I think it's just scandalous what you're saying,' I cried. 'Why, they hardly spoke to each other!'

'Oh, didn't they?' She turned on me. 'A hell of a lot you know about it. It was "Mr. Carey" and "Mrs. Leidner" in the house, but they used to meet outside. She'd walk down the path to the river. And he'd leave the dig for an hour at a time. They used to meet among the fruit trees.

'I saw him once just leaving her, striding back to the dig, and she was standing looking after him. I was a female cad, I suppose. I had some glasses with me and I took them out and had a good look at her face. If you ask me I believe she cared like hell for Richard Carey. . . .'



She broke off and looked at Poirot.

'Excuse my butting in on your case,' she said with a sudden rather twisted grin, 'but I thought you'd like to have the local colour correct.'

And she marched out of the room.

'M. Poirot,' I cried. 'I don't believe one word of it all!'

He looked at me and he smiled, and he said (very queerly I thought):

'You can't deny, nurse, that Miss Reilly has shed a certain—illumination on the case.'

CHAPTER XIX

A NEW SUSPICION

WE COULDN'T say any more just then because Dr. Reilly came in, saying jokingly that he'd killed off the most tiresome of his patients.

He and M. Poirot settled down to a more or less medical discussion of the psychology and mental state of an anonymous letter-writer. The doctor cited cases that he had known professionally, and M. Poirot told various stories from his own experience.

'It is not so simple as it seems,' he ended. 'There is the desire for power and very often a strong inferiority complex.'

Dr. Reilly nodded.

'That's why you often find that the author of anonymous letters is the last person in the place to be suspected. Some quiet inoffensive little soul who apparently can't say Bo to a goose—all sweetness and Christian meekness on the outside—and seething with all the fury of hell underneath!'

Poirot said thoughtfully:

'Should you say Mrs. Leidner had any tendency to an inferiority complex?'

Dr. Reilly scraped out his pipe with a chuckle.

'Last woman on earth I'd describe that way. No repressions about her. Life, life and more life—that's what she wanted—and got, too!'

'Do you consider it a possibility, psychologically speaking, that she wrote those letters?'

'Yes, I do. But if she did, the reason arose out of her instinct to dramatise herself. Mrs. Leidner was a bit of a film star in private

life! She *had* to be the centre of things—in the limelight. By the law of opposites she married Leidner who's about the most retiring and modest man I know. He adored her—but adoration by the fire-side wasn't enough for her. She had to be the persecuted heroine as well.'

'In fact,' said Poirot smiling, 'you don't subscribe to his theory that she wrote them and retained no memory of her act?'

'No, I don't. I didn't turn down the idea in front of him. You can't very well say to a man who's just lost a dearly loved wife that that same wife was a shameless exhibitionist, and that she drove him nearly crazy with anxiety to satisfy her sense of the dramatic. As a matter of fact it wouldn't be safe to tell any man the truth about his wife! Funnily enough, I'd trust most women with the truth about their husbands. Women can accept the fact that a man is a rotter, a swindler, a drug-taker, a confirmed liar, and a general swine without batting an eyelash and without its impairing their affection for the brute in the least! Women are wonderful realists.'

'Frankly, Dr. Reilly, what *was* your exact opinion of Mrs. Leidner?'

Dr. Reilly lay back in his chair and puffed slowly at his pipe.

'Frankly—it's hard to say! I didn't know her well enough. She'd got charm—any amount of it. Brains, sympathy . . . What else? She hadn't any of the ordinary unpleasant vices. She wasn't sensual or lazy or even particularly vain. She was, I've always thought (but I've no proofs of it), a most accomplished liar. What I don't know (and what I'd like to know) is whether she lied to herself or only to other people. I'm rather partial to liars myself. A woman who doesn't lie is a woman without imagination and without sympathy. I don't think she was really a man-hunter—she just liked the sport of bringing them down "with my bow and arrow." If you get my daughter on the subject——'

'We have had that pleasure,' said Poirot with a slight smile.

'H'm,' said Dr. Reilly. 'She hasn't wasted much time! Shoved her knife into her pretty thoroughly, I should imagine! The younger generation has no sentiment towards the dead. It's a pity all young people are prigs! They condemn the "old morality" and then proceed to set up a much more hard and fast code of their own. If Mrs. Leidner had had half a dozen affairs Sheila would probably have approved of her as "living her life fully"—or "obeying her blood instincts." What she doesn't see is that Mrs. Leidner was acting true to type—*her* type. The cat is obeying its blood instinct when it plays with the

mouse! It's made that way. Men aren't little boys to be shielded and protected. They've got to meet cat women—and faithful spaniel, yours-till-death adoring women, and hen-pecking nagging bird women—and all the rest of it! Life's a battlefield—not a picnic! I'd like to see Sheila honest enough to come off her high horse and admit that she hated Mrs. Leidner for good old thorough-going personal reasons. Sheila's about the only young girl in this place and she naturally assumes that she ought to have it all her own way with the young things in trousers. Naturally it annoys her when a woman, who in her view is middle-aged and who has already two husbands to her credit, comes along and licks her on her own ground. Sheila's a nice child, healthy and reasonably good-looking and attractive to the other sex as she should be. But Mrs. Leidner was something out of the ordinary in that line. She'd got that sort of calamitous magic that plays the deuce with things—a kind of Belle Dame sans Merci.'

I jumped in my chair. What a coincidence his saying that!

'Your daughter—I am not indiscreet—she has perhaps a *tendresse* for one of the young men out there?'

'Oh, I don't suppose so. She's had Emmott and Coleman dancing attendance on her as a matter of course. I don't know that she cares for one more than the other. There are a couple of young Air Force chaps too. I fancy all's fish that comes to her net at present. No, I think it's age daring to defeat youth that annoys her so much! She doesn't know as much of the world as I do. It's when you get to my age that you really appreciate a schoolgirl complexion and a clear eye and a firmly knit young body. But a woman over thirty can listen with rapt attention and throw in a word here and there to show the talker what a fine fellow he is—and few young men can resist that! Sheila's a pretty girl—but Louise Leidner was beautiful. Glorious eyes and that amazing golden fairness. Yes, she was a beautiful woman.'

Yes, I thought to myself, he's right. Beauty's a wonderful thing. She *had* been beautiful. It wasn't the kind of looks you were jealous of—you just sat back and admired. I felt that first day I met her that I'd do *anything* for Mrs. Leidner!

All the same, that night as I was being driven back to the Tell Yarimjah (Dr. Reilly made me stay for an early dinner) one or two things came back to my mind and made me rather uncomfortable. At the time I hadn't believed a word of all Sheila Reilly's outpouring. I'd taken it for sheer spite and malice.

But now I suddenly remembered the way Mrs. Leidner had insisted on going for a stroll by herself that afternoon and wouldn't hear of me coming with her. I couldn't help wondering if perhaps, after all, she *had* been going to meet Mr. Carey. . . . And of course, it *was* a little odd, really, the way he and she spoke to each other so formally. Most of the others she called by their Christian names.

He never seemed to look at her, I remembered. That might be because he disliked her—or it might be just the opposite. . . .

I gave myself a little shake. Here I was fancying and imagining all sorts of things—all because of a girl's spiteful outburst! It just showed how unkind and dangerous it was to go about saying that kind of thing.

Mrs. Leidner *hadn't* been like that at all. . . .

Of course, *she* hadn't liked Sheila Reilly. She'd really been—almost catty about her that day at lunch to Mr. Emmott.

Funny, the way he'd looked at her. The sort of way that you couldn't possibly tell what he was thinking. You never could tell what Mr. Emmott was thinking. He was so quiet. But very nice. A nice dependable person.

Now Mr. Coleman was a foolish young man if there ever was one!

I'd got to that point in my meditations when we arrived. It was just on nine o'clock and the big door was closed and barred.

Ibrahim came running with his great key to let me in.

We all went to bed early at Tell Yarimjah. There weren't any lights showing in the living-room. There was a light in the drawing-office and one in Dr. Leidner's office, but nearly all the other windows were dark. Every one must have gone to bed even earlier than usual.

As I passed the drawing-office to go to my room I looked in. Mr. Carey was in his shirt sleeves working over his big plan.

Terribly ill, he looked, I thought. So strained and worn. It gave me quite a pang. I don't know what there was about Mr. Carey—it wasn't what he *said* because he hardly said anything—and that of the most ordinary nature, and it wasn't what he *did*, for that didn't amount to much either—and yet you just couldn't help noticing him, and everything about him seemed to matter more than it would have about any one else. He just *counted*, if you know what I mean.

He turned his head and saw me. He removed his pipe from his mouth and said:

'Well, nurse, back from Hassanieh?'

'Yes, Mr. Carey: You're up working late. Everybody else seems to have gone to bed.'

'I thought I might as well get on with things,' he said. 'I was a bit behind-hand. And I shall be out on the dig all to-morrow. We're starting digging again.'

'Already?' I asked, shocked.

He looked at me rather queerly.

'It's the best thing, I think. I put it up to Leidner. He'll be in Hassanieh most of to-morrow seeing to things. But the rest of us will carry on here. You know it's not too easy all sitting round and looking at each other as things are.'

He was right there, of course. Especially in the nervy, jumpy state every one was in.

'Well, of course you're right in a way,' I said. 'It takes one's mind off if one's got something to do.'

The funeral, I knew, was to be the day after to-morrow.

He had bent over his plan again. I don't know why, but my heart just ached for him. I felt certain that he wasn't going to get any sleep.

'If you'd like a sleeping draught, Mr. Carey?' I said hesitatingly.

He shook his head with a smile.

'I'll carry on, nurse. Bad habit, sleeping draughts.'

'Well, good-night, Mr. Carey,' I said. 'If there's anything I can do——'

'Don't think so, thank you, nurse. Good-night.'

'I'm terribly sorry,' I said, rather too impulsively I suppose.

'Sorry?' He looked surprised.

'For—for everybody. It's all so dreadful. But especially for you.'

'For me? Why for me?'

'Well, you're such an old friend of them both.'

'I'm an old friend of Leidner's. I wasn't a friend of hers particularly.'

He spoke as though he had actually disliked her. Really, I wished Miss Reilly could have heard him!

'Well, good-night,' I said and hurried along to my room.

I fussed around a bit in my room before undressing. Washed out some handkerchiefs and a pair of wash-leather gloves and wrote up my diary. I just looked out of my door again before I really started to get ready for bed. The lights were still on in the drawing-office and in the south building.

I supposed Dr. Leidner was still up and working in his office. I

wondered whether I ought to go and say good-night to him. I hesitated about it—I didn't want to seem officious. He might be busy and not want to be disturbed. In the end, however, a sort of uneasiness drove me on. After all, it couldn't do any harm. I'd just say good-night, ask if there was anything I could do and come away.

But Dr. Leidner wasn't there. The office itself was lit up but there was no one in it except Miss Johnson. She had her head down on the table and was crying as though her heart would break.

It gave me quite a turn. She was such a quiet, self-controlled woman. It was pitiful to see her.

'Whatever is it, my dear?' I cried. I put my arm round her and patted her. 'Now, now, this won't do at all . . . You mustn't sit here crying all by yourself.'

She didn't answer and I felt the dreadful shuddering sobs that were racking her.

'Don't, my dear, don't,' I said. 'Take a hold on yourself. I'll go and make you a cup of nice hot tea.'

She raised her head and said:

'No, no, it's all right, nurse. I'm being a fool.'

'What's upset you, my dear?' I asked.

She didn't answer at once, then she said:

'It's all too awful. . . .'

'Now don't start thinking of it,' I told her. 'What's happened has happened and can't be mended. It's no use fretting.'

She sat up straight and began to pat her hair.

'I'm making rather a fool of myself,' she said in her gruff voice. 'I've been clearing up and tidying the office. Thought it was best to *do* something. And then—it all came over me suddenly——'

'Yes, yes,' I said hastily. 'I know. A nice strong cup of tea and a hot-water bottle in your bed is what you want,' I said.

And she had them too. I didn't listen to any protests.

'Thank you, nurse,' she said when I'd settled her in bed, and she was sipping her tea and the hot-water bottle was in. 'You're a nice kind sensible woman. It's not often I make such a fool of myself.'

'Oh, anybody's liable to do that at a time like this,' I said. 'What with one thing and another. The strain and the shock and the police here, there and everywhere. Why, I'm quite jumpy myself.'

She said slowly in rather a queer voice:

'What you said in there is true. What's happened has happened and can't be mended. . . .'

She was silent for a minute or two and then said—rather oddly, I thought:

‘She was never a nice woman!’

Well, I didn’t argue the point. I’d always felt it was quite natural for Miss Johnson and Mrs. Leidner not to hit it off.

I wondered if, perhaps, Miss Johnson had secretly had a feeling that she was pleased Mrs. Leidner was dead, and had then been ashamed of herself for the thought.

I said:

‘Now you go to sleep and don’t worry about anything.’

I just picked up a few things and set the room to rights. Stockings over the back of the chair and coat and skirt on a hanger. There was a little ball of crumpled paper on the floor where it must have fallen out of a pocket.

I was just smoothing it out to see whether I could safely throw it away when she quite startled me.

‘Give that to me!’

I did so—rather taken aback. She’d called out so peremptorily. She snatched it from me—fairly snatched it—and then held it in the candle flame till it was burnt to ashes.

As I say, I was startled—and I just stared at her.

I hadn’t had time to see what the paper was—she’d snatched it so quick. But funnily enough, as it burned it curled over towards me and I just saw that there were words written in ink on the paper.

It wasn’t till I was getting into bed that I realised why they’d looked sort of familiar to me.

It was the same handwriting as that of the anonymous letters.

Was *that* why Miss Johnson had given way to a fit of remorse? Had it been her all along who had written those anonymous letters?

CHAPTER XX

MISS JOHNSON, MRS MERCADO, MR REITER

I DON’T MIND CONFESSING that the idea came as a complete shock to me. I’d never thought of associating *Miss Johnson* with the letters. Mrs. Mercado, perhaps. But Miss Johnson was a real lady, and so self-controlled and sensible.

But I reflected, remembering the conversation I had listened to that evening between M. Poirot and Dr. Reilly, that that might be just *why*.

If it were Miss Johnson who had written the letters it explained a lot. Mind you, I didn't think for a minute Miss Johnson had had anything to do with the murder. But I *did* see that her dislike of Mrs. Leidner might have made her succumb to the temptation of well—putting the wind up her—to put it vulgarly.

She might have hoped to frighten away Mrs. Leidner from the dig.

But then Mrs. Leidner had been murdered and Miss Johnson had felt terrible pangs of remorse—first for her cruel trick and also, perhaps, because she realised that those letters were acting as a very good shield to the actual murderer. No wonder she had broken down so utterly. She was, I was sure, a decent soul at heart. And it explained, too, why she had caught so eagerly at my consolation of 'what's happened's happened and can't be mended.'

And then her cryptic remark—her vindication of herself—'she was never a nice woman!'

The question was, what was *I* to do about it?

I tossed and turned for a good while and in the end decided I'd let M. Poirot know about it at the first opportunity.

He came out next day but I didn't get a chance of speaking to him what you might call privately.

We had just a minute alone together and before I could collect myself to know how to begin, he had come close to me and was whispering instructions in my ear.

'Me, I shall talk to Miss Johnson—and others, perhaps, in the living-room. You have the key of Mrs. Leidner's room still?'

'Yes,' I said.

'*Très bien*. Go there, shut the door behind you and give a cry—not a scream—a cry. You understand what I mean—it is alarm—surprise that I want you to express—not mad terror. As for the excuse if you are heard—I leave that to you—the stepped toe or what you will.'

At that moment Miss Johnson came out into the courtyard and there was no time for more.

I understood well enough what M. Poirot was after. As soon as he and Miss Johnson had gone into the living-room I went across to Mrs. Leidner's room and, unlocking the door, went in and pulled the door to behind me.

I can't say I didn't feel a bit of a fool standing up in an empty

room and giving a yelp all for nothing at all. Besides, it wasn't so easy to know just how loud to do it. I gave a pretty loud 'Oh' and then tried it a bit higher and a bit lower.

Then I came out again and prepared my excuse of a stepped (stubbed I *suppose* he meant!) toe.

But it soon appeared that no excuse would be needed. Poirot and Miss Johnson were talking together earnestly and there had clearly been no interruption.

'Well,' I thought, 'that settles that. Either Miss Johnson imagined that cry she heard or else it was something quite different.'

I didn't like to go in and interrupt them. There was a deck-chair on the porch so I sat down there. Their voices floated out to me.

'The position is delicate, you understand,' Poirot was saying. 'Dr. Leidner—obviously he adored his wife—'

'He worshipped her,' said Miss Johnson.

'He tells me, naturally, how fond all his staff was of her! As for them, what can they say? Naturally they say the same thing. It is politeness. It is decency. It *may* also be the truth! But also it may *not*! And I am convinced, mademoiselle, that the key to this enigma lies in a complete understanding of Mrs. Leidner's character. If I could get the opinion—the honest opinion—of every member of the staff, I might, from the whole, build up a picture. Frankly, that is why I am here to-day. I knew Dr. Leidner would be in Hassanieh. That makes it easy for me to have an interview with each of you here in turn, and beg your help.'

'That's all very well,' began Miss Johnson and stopped.

'Do not make me the British *clichés*,' Poirot begged. 'Do not say it is not the cricket or the football, that to speak anything but well of the dead is not done—that—*enfin*—there is loyalty! Loyalty it is a pestilential thing in crime. Again and again it obscures the truth.'

'I've no particular loyalty to Mrs. Leidner,' said Miss Johnson dryly. There was indeed a sharp and acid tone in her voice. 'Dr. Leidner's a different matter. And, after all, she was his wife.'

'Precisely—precisely. I understand that you would not wish to speak against your chief's wife. But this is not a question of a testimonial. It is a question of sudden and mysterious death. If I am to believe that it is a martyred angel who has been killed it does not add to the easiness of my task.'

'I certainly shouldn't call her an angel,' said Miss Johnson and the acid tone was even more in evidence.

'Tell me your opinion, frankly, of Mrs. Leidner—as a woman.'

'H'm! To begin with, M. Poirot, I'll give you this warning. I'm prejudiced. I am—we all were—devoted to Dr. Leidner. And, I suppose, when Mrs. Leidner came along, we were jealous. We resented the demands she made on his time and attention. The devotion he showed her irritated us. I'm being truthful, M. Poirot, and it isn't very pleasant for me. I resented her presence here—yes, I did, though, of course, I tried never to show it. It made a difference to us, you see.'

'Us? You say us?'

'I mean Mr. Carey and myself. We're the two old-timers, you see. And we didn't much care for the new order of things. I suppose that's natural, though perhaps it was rather petty of us. But it *did* make a difference.'

'What kind of a difference?'

'Oh! to everything. We used to have such a happy time. A good deal of fun, you know, and rather silly jokes, like people do who work together. Dr. Leidner was quite light-hearted—just like a boy.'

'And when Mrs. Leidner came she changed all that?'

'Well, I suppose it wasn't her *fault*. It wasn't so bad last year. And please believe, M. Poirot, that it wasn't anything she *did*. She's always been charming to me—quite charming. That's why I've felt ashamed sometimes. It wasn't her fault that little things she said and did seemed to rub me up the wrong way. Really nobody could be nicer than she was.'

'But nevertheless things were changed this season? There was a different atmosphere.'

'Oh, entirely. Really, I don't know what it was. Everything seemed to go wrong—not with the work—I mean with us—our tempers and our nerves. All on edge. Almost the sort of feeling you get when there is a thunderstorm coming.'

'And you put that down to Mrs. Leidner's influence?'

'Well, it was never like that before she came,' said Miss Johnson dryly. 'Oh! I'm a cross-grained, complaining old dog. Conservative—liking things always the same. You really mustn't take any notice of me, M. Poirot.'

'How would you describe to me Mrs. Leidner's character and temperament?'

Miss Johnson hesitated for a moment. Then she said slowly:

'Well, of course, she was temperamental. A lot of ups and downs. Nice to people one day and perhaps wouldn't speak to them the next.

She was very kind, I think. And very thoughtful for others. All the same you could see she had been thoroughly spoilt all her life. She took Dr. Leidner's waiting on her hand and foot as perfectly natural. And I don't think she ever really appreciated what a very remarkable—what a really great—man she had married. That used to annoy me sometimes. And of course she was terribly highly strung and nervous. The things she used to imagine and the states she used to get into! I was thankful when Dr. Leidner brought Nurse Leatheran here. It was too much for him having to cope both with his work and with his wife's fears.'

'What is your own opinion of these anonymous letters she received?'

I had to do it. I leaned forward in my chair till I could just catch sight of Miss Johnson's profile turned to Poirot in answer to his question.

She was looking perfectly cool and collected.

'I think some one in America had a spite against her and was trying to frighten or annoy her.'

'Pas plus sérieux que ça?'

'That's my opinion. She was a very handsome woman, you know, and might easily have had enemies. I think those letters were written by some spiteful woman. Mrs. Leidner being of a nervous temperament took them seriously.'

'She certainly did that,' said Poirot. 'But remember—the last of them arrived by hand.'

'Well, I suppose that *could* have been managed if any one had given their minds to it. Women will take a lot of trouble to gratify their spite, M. Poirot.'

They will indeed, I thought to myself!

'Perhaps you are right, mademoiselle. As you say, Mrs. Leidner was handsome. By the way, you know Miss Reilly, the doctor's daughter?'

'Sheila Reilly? Yes, of course.'

Poirot adopted a very confidential, gossipy tone.

'I have heard a rumour (naturally I do not like to ask the doctor) that there was a *tendresse* between her and one of the members of Dr. Leidner's staff. Is that so, do you know?'

Miss Johnson appeared rather amused.

'Oh, young Coleman and David Emmott were both inclined to dance attendance. I believe there was some rivalry as to who was to be her partner in some event at the club. Both the boys went in on

Saturday evenings to the club as a general rule. But I don't know that there was anything in it on her side. She's the only young creature in the place, you know, and so she's by way of being the belle of it. She's got the Air Force dancing attendance on her as well.'

'So you think there is nothing in it?'

'Well—I don't know.' Miss Johnson became thoughtful. 'It is true that she comes out this way fairly often. Up to the dig and all that. In fact, Mrs. Leidner was chaffing David Emmott about it the other day—saying the girl was running after him. Which was rather a catty thing to say, I thought, and I don't think he liked it. . . . Yes, she was here a good deal. I saw her riding towards the dig on that awful afternoon.' She nodded her head towards the open window. 'But neither David Emmott nor Coleman were on duty that afternoon. Richard Carey was in charge. Yes, perhaps she is attracted to one of the boys—but she's such a modern unsentimental young woman that one doesn't know quite how seriously to take her. I'm sure I don't know which of them it is. Bill's a nice boy, and not nearly such a fool as he pretends to be. David Emmott is a dear—and there's a lot to him. He is the deep, quiet kind.'

Then she looked quizzically at Poirot and said:

'But has this any bearing on the crime, M. Poirot?'

M. Poirot threw up his hands in a very French fashion.

'You make me blush, mademoiselle,' he said. 'You expose me as a mere gossip. But what will you, I am interested always in the love affairs of young people.'

'Yes,' said Miss Johnson with a little sigh. 'It's nice when the course of true love runs smooth.'

Poirot gave an answering sigh. I wondered if Miss Johnson was thinking of some love affair of her own when she was a girl. And I wondered if M. Poirot had a wife, and if he went on in the way you always hear foreigners do, with mistresses and things like that. He looks so comic I couldn't imagine it.

'Sheila Reilly has a lot of character,' said Miss Johnson. 'She's young and she's crude, but she's the right sort.'

'I take your word for it, mademoiselle,' said Poirot.

He got up and said, 'Are there any other members of the staff in the house?'

'Marie Mercado is somewhere about. All the men are up on the dig to-day. I think they wanted to get out of the house. I don't blame them. If you'd like to go up to the dig——'

She came out on the verandah and said, smiling to me:

'Nurse Leatheran won't mind taking you, I dare say.'

'Oh, certainly, Miss Johnson,' I said.

'And you'll come back to lunch, won't you, M. Poirot?'

'Enchanted, mademoiselle.'

Miss Johnson went back into the living-room where she was engaged in cataloguing.

'Mrs. Mercado's on the roof,' I said. 'Do you want to see her first?'

'It would be as well, I think. Let us go up.'

As we went up the stairs I said:

'I did what you told me. Did you hear anything?'

'Not a sound.'

'That will be a weight off Miss Johnson's mind at any rate,' I said. 'She's been worrying that she might have done something about it.'

Mrs. Mercado was sitting on the parapet, her head bent down, and she was so deep in thought that she never heard us till Poirot halted opposite her and bade her good-morning.

Then she looked up with a start.

She looked ill this morning, I thought, her small face pinched and wizened and great dark circles under her eyes.

'*Encore moi.*' said Poirot. 'I come to-day with a special object.'

And he went on much in the same way as he had done to Miss Johnson, explaining how necessary it was that he should get a true picture of Mrs. Leidner.

Mrs. Mercado, however, wasn't as honest as Miss Johnson had been. She burst into fulsome praise which, I was pretty sure, was quite far removed from her real feelings.

'Dear, *dear* Louise! It's so hard to explain her to some one who didn't know her. She was such an *exotic* creature. Quite different from any one else. You felt that, I'm sure, nurse? A martyr to nerves, of course, and full of fancies, but one put up with things in her, one wouldn't from any one else. And she was so *sweet* to us all, wasn't she, nurse? And so *humble* about herself—I mean she didn't know anything about archaeology, and she was so eager to learn. Always asking my husband about the chemical processes for treating the metal objects and helping Miss Johnson to mend pottery. Oh, we were all *devoted* to her.'

'Then it is not true, madame, what I have heard, that there was a certain tenseness—an uncomfortable atmosphere—here?'

Mrs. Mercado opened her opaque black eyes very wide.

'Oh! who *can* have been telling you that? Nurse? Dr. Leidner? I'm sure *he* would never notice anything, poor man.'

And she shot a thoroughly unfriendly glance at me.

Poirot smiled easily.

'I have my spies, madame,' he declared gaily. And just for a minute I saw her eyelids quiver and blink.

'Don't you think,' asked Mrs. Mercado with an air of great sweetness, 'that after an event of this kind, every one always pretends a lot of things that never were? You know—tension, atmosphere, a "feeling that something was going to happen?" I think people just *make up* these things afterwards.'

'There is a lot in what you say, madame,' said Poirot.

'And it really *wasn't* true! We were a thoroughly happy family here.'

'That woman is one of the most utter liars I've ever known,' I said indignantly, when M. Poirot and I were clear of the house and walking along the path to the dig. 'I'm sure she simply hated Mrs. Leidner really!'

'She is hardly the type to whom one would go for the truth,' Poirot agreed.

'Waste of time talking to her,' I snapped.

'Hardly that—hardly that. If a person tells you lies with her lips she is sometimes telling you truth with her eyes. What is she afraid of, little Madame Mercado? I saw fear in her eyes. Yes—decidedly she is afraid of something. It is very interesting.'

'I've got something to tell you, M. Poirot,' I said.

Then I told him all about my return the night before and my strong belief that Miss Johnson was the writer of the anonymous letters.

'So *she's* a liar too!' I said. 'The cool way she answered you this morning about these same letters!'

'Yes,' said Poirot. 'It was interesting, that. *For she let out the fact that she knew all about those letters.* So far they have not been spoken of in the presence of the staff. Of course, it is quite possible that Dr. Leidner told her about them yesterday. They are old friends, he and she. But if he did not—well—then it is curious and interesting, is it not?'

My respect for him went up. It was clever the way he had tricked her into mentioning the letters.

'Are you going to tackle her about them?' I asked.

M. Poirot seemed quite shocked by the idea.

'No, no, indeed. Always it is unwise to parade one's knowledge. Until the last minute I keep everything here,' he tapped his forehead. 'At the right moment—I make the spring—like the panther—and, *mon Dieu!* the consternation!'

I couldn't help laughing to myself at little M. Poirot in the rôle of a panther.

We had just reached the dig. The first person we saw was Mr. Reiter, who was busy photographing some walling.

It's my opinion that the men who were digging just hacked out walls wherever they wanted them. That's what it looked like anyway. Mr. Carey explained to me that you could feel the difference at once with a pick, and he tried to show me—but I never saw. When the man said '*Libn*'—mud brick—it was just ordinary dirt and mud as far as I could see.

Mr. Reiter finished his photographs and handed over the camera and the plates to his boy and told him to take them back to the house.

Poirot asked him one or two questions about exposures and film packs and so on which he answered very readily. He seemed pleased to be asked about his work.

He was just tendering his excuses for leaving us when Poirot plunged once more into his set speech. As a matter of fact it wasn't quite a set speech because he varied it a little each time to suit the person he was talking to. But I'm not going to write it all down every time. With sensible people like Miss Johnson he went straight to the point, and with some of the others he had to beat about the bush a bit more. But it came to the same in the end.

'Yes, yes, I see what you mean,' said Mr. Reiter. 'But indeed, I do not see that I can be much help to you. I am new here this season and I did not speak much with Mrs. Leidner. I regret, but indeed I can tell you nothing.'

There was something a little stiff and foreign in the way he spoke, though, of course, he hadn't got any accent—except an American one, I mean.

'You can at least tell me whether you liked or disliked her?' said Poirot with a smile.

Mr. Reiter got quite red and stammered:

'She was a charming person—most charming. And intellectual. She had a very fine brain—yes.'

'*Bien!* You liked her. And she liked you?'

Mr. Reiter got redder still.

'Oh, I—I don't know that she noticed me much. And I was unfortunate once or twice. I was always unlucky when I tried to do anything for her. I'm afraid I annoyed her by my clumsiness. It was quite unintentional . . . I would have done *anything*—'

Poirot took pity on his flounderings.

'Perfectly—perfectly. Let us pass to another matter. Was it a happy atmosphere in the house?'

'Please.'

'Were you all happy together? Did you laugh and talk?'

'No—no, not exactly that. There was a little—stiffness.'

He paused, struggling with himself, and then said:

'You see, I am not very good in company. I am clumsy. I am shy. Dr. Leidner always he has been most kind to me. But—it is stupid—I cannot overcome my shyness. I say always the wrong thing. I upset water jugs. I am unlucky.'

He really looked like a large awkward child.

'We all do these things when we are young,' said Poirot, smiling. 'The poise, the *savoir faire*, it comes later.'

Then with a word of farewell we walked on.

He said:

'That, *ma soeur*, is either an extremely simple young man or a very remarkable actor.'

I didn't answer. I was caught up once more by the fantastic notion that one of these people was a dangerous and cold-blooded murderer. Somehow, on this beautiful still sunny morning, it seemed impossible.

CHAPTER XXI

MR MERCADO, RICHARD CAREY

'THEY WORK in two separate places, I see,' said Poirot halting.

Mr. Reiter had been doing his photography on an outlying portion of the main excavation. A little distance away from us a second swarm of men were coming and going with baskets.

'That's what they call the deep cut,' I explained. 'They don't find much there, nothing but rubbishy broken pottery, but Dr. Leidner always says it's very interesting, so I suppose it must be.'

'Let us go there.'

We walked together slowly for the sun was hot.

Mr. Mercado was in command. We saw him below us talking to the foreman, an old man like a tortoise who wore a tweed coat over his long striped cotton gown.

It was a little difficult to get down to them as there was only a narrow path or stair and basket boys were going up and down it constantly, and they always seemed to be as blind as bats and never to think of getting out of the way.

As I followed Poirot down he said suddenly over his shoulder:

'Is Mr. Mercado right-handed or left-handed?'

Now that was an extraordinary question if you like!

I thought a minute, then:

'Right-handed,' I said decisively.

Poirot didn't condescend to explain. He just went on and I followed him.

Mr. Mercado seemed rather pleased to see us.

His long melancholy face lit up.

M. Poirot pretended to an interest in archaeology that I'm sure he couldn't have really felt, but Mr. Mercado responded at once.

He explained that they had already cut down through twelve levels of house occupation.

'We are now definitely in the fourth millennium,' he said with enthusiasm.

I always thought a millennium was in the future—the time when everything comes right.

Mr. Mercado pointed out belts of ashes (how his hand did shake! I wondered if he might possibly have malaria) and he explained how the pottery changed in character, and about burials—and how they had had one level almost entirely composed of infant burials—poor little things—and about flexed position and orientation, which seemed to mean the way the bones were lying.

And then suddenly, just as he was stooping down to pick up a kind of flint knife that was lying with some pots in a corner, he leapt into the air with a wild yell.

He spun round to find me and Poirot staring at him in astonishment.

He clapped his hand to his left arm.

'Something stung me—like a red-hot needle.'

Immediately Poirot was galvanised into energy.

'Quick, *mon cher*, let us see. Nurse Leatheran!'

I came forward.

He seized Mr. Mercado's arm and deftly rolled back the sleeve of his khaki shirt to the shoulder.

'There,' said Mr. Mercado, pointing.

About three inches below the shoulder there was a minute prick from which the blood was oozing.

'Curious,' said Poirot. He peered into the rolled-up sleeve. 'I can see nothing. It was an ant, perhaps?'

'Better put on a little iodine,' I said.

I always carry an iodine pencil with me, and I whipped it out and applied it. But I was a little absent-minded as I did so, for my attention had been caught by something quite different. Mr. Mercado's arm, all the way up the forearm to the elbow, was marked all over by tiny punctures. I knew well enough what *they* were—the marks of a *hypodermic needle*.

Mr. Mercado rolled down his sleeve again and recommenced his explanations. Mr. Poirot listened, but didn't try to bring the conversation round to the Leidners. In fact he didn't ask Mr. Mercado anything at all.

Presently we said good-bye to Mr. Mercado and climbed up the path again.

'It was neat that, did you not think so?' my companion asked.

'Neat?' I asked.

M. Poirot took something from behind the lapel of his coat and surveyed it affectionately. To my surprise I saw that it was a long sharp darning needle with a blob of sealing wax making it into a pin.

'M. Poirot,' I cried, 'did *you* do that?'

'I was the stinging insect—yes. And very neatly I did it, too, do you not think so? You did not see me.'

That was true enough. *I* never saw him do it. And I'm sure Mr. Mercado hadn't suspected. He must have been quick as lightning.

'But, M. Poirot, why?' I asked.

He answered me by another question.

'Did you notice anything, sister?' he asked.

I nodded my head slowly.

'Hypodermic marks,' I said.

'So now we know something about Mr. Mercado,' said Poirot. 'I suspected—but I did not *know*. It is always necessary to *know*.'

'And you don't care how you set about it!' I thought, but didn't say.

Poirot suddenly clapped his hand to his pocket.

'Alas, I have dropped my handkerchief down there. I concealed the pin in it.'

'I'll get it for you,' I said and hurried back.

I'd got the feeling, you see, by this time, that M. Poirot and I were the doctor and nurse in charge of a case. At least, it was more like an operation and he was the surgeon. Perhaps I oughtn't to say so, but in a queer way I was beginning to enjoy myself.

I remember just after I'd finished my training, I went to a case in a private house and the need for an immediate operation arose, and the patient's husband was cranky about nursing homes. He just wouldn't hear of his wife being taken to one. Said it had to be done in the house.

Well, of course it was just splendid for me! Nobody else to have a look in! I was in charge of everything. Of course, I was terribly nervous—I thought of everything conceivable that doctor could want, but even then I was afraid I might have forgotten something. You never know with doctors. They ask for absolutely anything sometimes! But everything went splendidly! I had each thing ready as he asked for it, and he actually told me I'd done first-rate after it was over—and that's a thing most doctors wouldn't bother to do! The G.P. was very nice too. And I ran the whole thing myself!

The patient recovered, too, so everybody was happy.

Well, I felt rather the same now. In a way M. Poirot reminded me of that surgeon. *He* was a little man, too. Ugly little man with a face like a monkey, but a wonderful surgeon. He knew instinctively just where to go. I've seen a lot of surgeons and I know what a lot of difference there is.

Gradually I'd been growing a kind of confidence in M. Poirot. I felt that he, too, knew exactly what he was doing. And I was getting to feel that it was my job to help him—as you might say—to have the forceps and the swabs and all handy just when he wanted them. That's why it seemed just as natural for me to run off and look for his handkerchief as it would have been to pick up a towel that a doctor had thrown on the floor.

When I'd found it and got back I couldn't see him at first. But at last I caught sight of him. He was sitting a little way from the mound talking to Mr. Carey. Mr. Carey's boy was standing near with that great big rod thing with metres marked on it, but just at that moment he said something to the boy and the boy took it away. It seemed he had finished with it for the time being.

I'd like to get this next bit quite clear. You see, I wasn't quite sure what M. Poirot did or didn't want me to do. He might, I mean, have sent me back for that handkerchief *on purpose*. To get me out of the way.

It was just like an operation over again. You've got to be careful to hand the doctor just what he wants and not what he *doesn't* want. I mean, suppose you gave him the artery forceps at the wrong moment, and were late with them at the right moment! Thank goodness I know my work in the theatre well enough. I'm not likely to make mistakes there. But in this business I was really the rawest of raw little probationers. And so I had to be particularly careful not to make any silly mistakes.

Of course, I didn't for one moment imagine that M. Poirot didn't want me to hear what he and Mr. Carey were saying. But he might have thought he'd get Mr. Carey to talk better if I wasn't there.

Now I don't want anybody to get it into their heads that I'm the kind of woman who goes about eavesdropping on private conversations. I wouldn't do such a thing. Not for a moment. Not however much I wanted to.

And what I mean is if it *had* been a private conversation I wouldn't for a moment have done what, as a matter of fact, I actually did do.

As I looked at it I was in a privileged position. After all, you hear many a thing when a patient's coming round after an anaesthetic. The patient wouldn't want you to hear it—and usually has no idea you *have* heard it—but the fact remains you *do* hear it. I just took it that Mr. Carey was the patient. He'd be none the worse for what he didn't know about. And if you think that I was just curious, well, I'll admit that I *was* curious. I didn't want to miss anything I could help.

All this is just leading up to the fact that I turned aside and went by a roundabout way up behind the big dump until I was a foot from where they were, but concealed from them by the corner of the dump. And if any one says it was dishonourable I just beg to disagree. *Nothing* ought to be hidden from the nurse in charge of the case, though, of course, it's for the doctor to say what shall be *done*.

I don't know, of course, what M. Poirot's line of approach had been, but by the time I'd got there he was aiming straight for the bull's eye, so to speak.

'Nobody appreciates Dr. Leidner's devotion to his wife more than I do,' he was saying. 'But it is often the case that one learns

more about a person from their enemies than from their friends.'

'You suggest that their faults are more important than their virtues?' said Mr. Carey. His tone was dry and ironic.

'Undoubtedly—when it comes to murder. It seems odd that as far as I know nobody has yet been murdered for having too perfect a character! And yet perfection is undoubtedly an irritating thing.'

'I'm afraid I'm hardly the right person to help you,' said Mr. Carey. 'To be perfectly honest, Mrs. Leidner and I didn't hit it off particularly well. I don't mean that we were in any sense of the word enemies, but we were not exactly friends. Mrs. Leidner was, perhaps, a shade jealous of my old friendship with her husband. I, for my part, although I admired her very much and thought she was an extremely attractive woman, was just a shade resentful of her influence over Leidner. As a result we were quite polite to each other, but not intimate.'

'Admirably explained,' said Poirot.

I could just see their heads, and I saw Mr. Carey's turn sharply as though something in M. Poirot's detached tone struck him disagreeably.

M. Poirot went on:

'Was not Dr. Leidner distressed that you and his wife did not get on together better?'

Carey hesitated a minute before saying:

'Really—I'm not sure. He never said anything. I always hoped he didn't notice it. He was very wrapped up in his work, you know.'

'So the truth, according to you, is that you did not really like Mrs. Leidner?'

Carey shrugged his shoulders.

'I should probably have liked her very much if she hadn't been Leidner's wife.'

He laughed as though amused by his own statement.

Poirot was arranging a little heap of broken pot-sherds. He said in a dreamy, far-away voice:

'I talked to Miss Johnson this morning. She admitted that she was prejudiced against Mrs. Leidner and did not like her very much, although she hastened to add that Mrs. Leidner had always been charming to her.'

'All quite true, I should say,' said Carey.

'So I believed. Then I had a conversation with Mrs. Mercado. She told me at great length how devoted she had been to Mrs. Leidner and how much she had admired her.'

Carey made no answer to this, and after waiting a minute or two Poirot went on:

'That—I did not believe! Then I come to you and that which you tell me—well, again—I *do not believe* . . .'

Carey stiffened. I could hear the anger—repressed anger—in his voice.

'I really cannot help your beliefs—or your disbeliefs, M. Poirot. You've heard the truth and you can take it or leave it as far as I am concerned.'

Poirot did not grow angry. Instead he sounded particularly meek and depressed.

'Is it my fault what I do—or do not believe? I have a sensitive ear, you know. And then—there are always plenty of stories going about—rumours floating in the air. One listens—and perhaps—one learns something! Yes, there *are* stories . . .'

Carey sprang to his feet. I could see clearly a little pulse that beat in his temple. He looked simply splendid! So lean and so brown—and that wonderful jaw, hard and square. I don't wonder women fell for that man.

'What stories?' he asked savagely.

Poirot looked sideways at him.

'Perhaps you can guess. The usual sort of story—about you and Mrs. Leidner.'

'What foul minds people have!'

'*N'est ce pas?* They are like dogs. However deep you bury an unpleasantness a dog will always root it up again.'

'And you believe these stories?'

'I am willing to be convinced—of the truth,' said Poirot gravely.

'I doubt if you'd know the truth if you heard it,' Carey laughed rudely.

'Try me and see,' said Poirot, watching him.

'I will then! You shall have the truth! I hated Louise Leidner—there's the truth for you! I hated her like hell!'

DAVID EMMOTT, FATHER LAVIGNY
AND A DISCOVERY

TURNING ABRUPTLY AWAY, Carey strode off with long angry strides.

Poirot sat looking after him and presently he murmured:

‘Yes—I see . . .’

Without turning his head he said in a slightly louder voice:

‘Do not come round the corner for a minute, nurse. In case he turns his head. Now it is all right. You have my handkerchief? Many thanks. You are most amiable.’

He didn’t say anything at all about my having been listening—and how he knew I *was* listening I can’t think. He’d never once looked in that direction I was rather relieved he didn’t say anything. I mean, I felt all right with *myself* about it, but it might have been a little awkward explaining to him. So it was a good thing he didn’t seem to want explanations.

‘Do you think he did hate her, M. Poirot?’ I asked.

Nodding his head slowly with a curious expression on his face, Poirot answered.

‘Yes—I think he did.’

Then he got up briskly and began to walk to where the men were working on the top of the mound. I followed him. We couldn’t see any one but Arabs at first, but we finally found Mr. Emmott lying face downwards blowing dust off a skeleton that had just been uncovered.

He gave his pleasant grave smile when he saw us.

‘Have you come to see round?’ he asked. ‘I’ll be free in a minute.’

He sat up, took his knife and began daintily cutting the earth away from round the bones, stopping every now and then to use either a bellows or his own breath. A very insanitary proceeding the latter, I thought.

‘You’ll get all sorts of nasty germs in your mouth, Mr. Emmott,’ I protested.

‘Nasty germs are my daily diet, nurse,’ he said gravely. ‘Germs can’t do anything to an archaeologist—they just get naturally discouraged trying.’

He scraped a little more away round the thigh bone. Then he spoke to the foreman at his side, directing him exactly what he wanted done.

'There,' he said, rising to his feet. 'That's ready for Reiter to photograph after lunch. Rather nice stuff she had in with her.'

He showed us a little verdigrissy copper bowl and some pins. And a lot of gold and blue things that had been her necklace of beads.

The bones and all the objects were brushed and cleaned with a knife and kept in position ready to be photographed.

'Who is she?' asked Poirot.

'First millenium. A lady of some consequence perhaps. Skull looks rather odd—I must get Mercado to look at it. It suggests death by foul play.'

'A Mrs. Leidner of two thousand odd years ago?' said Poirot.

'Perhaps,' said Mr. Emmott.

Bill Coleman was doing something with a pick to a wall face.

David Emmott called something to him which I didn't catch and then started showing M. Poirot round.

When the short explanatory tour was over Emmott looked at his watch. 'We knock off in ten minutes,' he said. 'Shall we walk back to the house?'

'That will suit me excellently,' said Poirot.

We walked slowly along the well-worn path.

'I expect you are all glad to get back to work again,' said Poirot.

Emmott replied gravely:

'Yes, it's much the best thing. It's not been any too easy loafing about the house and making conversation.'

'Knowing all the time *that one of you was a murderer.*'

Emmott did not answer. He made no gesture of dissent. I knew now that he had had a suspicion of the truth from the very first when he had questioned the house-boys.

After a few minutes he asked quietly:

'Are you getting anywhere, M. Poirot?'

Poirot said gravely:

'Will you help me to get somewhere?'

'Why, naturally.'

Watching him closely, Poirot said:

'The hub of the case is Mrs. Leidner. I want to know about Mrs. Leidner.'

David Emmott said slowly:

'What do you mean by knowing about her?'

'I do not mean where she came from and what her maiden name

was. I do not mean the shape of her face and the colour of her eyes. I mean her—herself.’

‘You think that counts in the case?’

‘I am quite sure of it.’

Emmott was silent for a moment or two, then he said:

‘Maybe you’re right.’

‘And that is where you can help me. You can tell me what sort of a woman she was.’

‘Can I? I’ve often wondered about it myself.’

‘Didn’t you make up your mind on the subject?’

‘I think I did in the end.’

‘*Eh bien?*’

But Mr. Emmott was silent for some minutes, then he said:

‘What did nurse think of her? Women are said to sum up other women quickly enough, and a nurse has a wide experience of types.’

Poirot didn’t give me any chance of speaking even if I had wanted to. He said quickly:

‘What I want to know is what a *man* thought of her?’

Emmott smiled a little.

‘I expect they’d all be much the same.’ He paused and said, ‘She wasn’t young, but I think she was about the most beautiful woman I’ve ever come across.’

‘That’s hardly an answer, Mr. Emmott.’

‘It’s not so far off one, M. Poirot.’

He was silent a minute or two and then he went on:

‘There used to be a fairy story I read when I was a kid. A Northern fairy story about the Snow Queen and Little Kay. I guess Mrs. Leidner was rather like that—always taking Little Kay for a ride.’

‘Ah, yes, a tale of Hans Andersen, is it not? And there was a girl in it. Little Gerda, was that her name?’

‘Maybe. I don’t remember much of it.’

‘Can’t you go a little further, Mr. Emmott?’

David Emmott shook his head.

‘I don’t even know if I’ve summed her up correctly. She wasn’t easy to read. She’d do a devilish thing one day, and a really fine one the next. But I think you’re about right when you say that she’s the hub of the case. That’s what she always wanted to be—at the centre of things. And she liked to get *at* other people—I mean, she wasn’t just satisfied with being passed the toast and the peanut butter, she wanted you to turn your mind and soul inside out for her to look at it.’

'And if one did not give her that satisfaction?' asked Poirot.

'Then she could turn ugly!'

I saw his lips close resolutely and his jaw set.

'I suppose, Mr. Emmott, you would not care to express a plain unofficial opinion as to who murdered her?'

'I don't know,' said Emmott. 'I really haven't the slightest idea. I rather think that, if I'd been Carl—Carl Reiter, I mean—I would have had a shot at murdering her. She was a pretty fair devil to him. But, of course, he asks for it by being so darned sensitive. Just invites you to give him a kick in the pants.'

'And did Mrs. Leidner give him—a kick in the pants?' inquired Poirot.

Emmott gave a sudden grin.

'No. Pretty little jabs with an embroidery needle—that was her method. He *was* irritating, of course. Just like some blubbering, poor-spirited kid. But a needle's a painful weapon.'

I stole a glance at Poirot and thought I detected a slight quiver of his lips.

'But you don't really believe that Carl Reiter killed her?' he asked.

'No. I don't believe you'd kill a woman because she persistently made you look a fool at every meal.'

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

Of course, Mr. Emmott made Mrs. Leidner sound quite inhuman. There was something to be said on the other side too.

There had been something terribly irritating about Mr. Reiter's attitude. He jumped when she spoke to him, and did idiotic things like passing her the marmalade again and again when he knew she never ate it. I'd have felt inclined to snap at him a bit myself.

Men don't understand how their mannerisms can get on women's nerves so that you feel you just have to snap.

I thought I'd just mention that to Mr. Poirot some time.

We had arrived back by now and Mr. Emmott offered Poirot a wash and took him into his room.

I hurried across the courtyard to mine.

I came out again about the same time they did and we were all making for the dining-room when Father Lavigny appeared in the doorway of his room and invited Poirot in.

Mr. Emmott came on round and he and I went into the dining-room together. Miss Johnson and Mrs. Mercado were there already,

and after a few minutes Mr. Mercado, Mr. Reiter and Bill Coleman joined us.

We were just sitting down and Mercado had told the Arab boy to tell Father Lavigny lunch was ready when we were all startled by a faint, muffled cry.

I suppose our nerves weren't very good yet, for we all jumped, and Miss Johnson got quite pale and said:

'*What was that?* What's happened?'

Mrs. Mercado stared at her and said:

'My dear, what *is* the matter with you? It's some noise outside in the fields.'

But at that minute Poirot and Father Lavigny came in.

'We thought some one was hurt,' Miss Johnson said.

'A thousand pardons, mademoiselle,' cried Poirot. 'The fault is mine. Father Lavigny, he explains to me some tablets, and I take one to the window to see better—and, *ma foi*, not looking where I was going, I steb the toe, and the pain is sharp for the moment and I cry out.'

'We thought it was another murder,' said Mrs. Mercado, laughing.

'Marie!' said her husband.

His tone was reproachful and she flushed and bit her lip.

Miss Johnson hastily turned the conversation to the dig and what objects of interest had turned up that morning. Conversation all through lunch was sternly archaeological.

I think we all felt it was the safest thing.

After we had had coffee we adjourned to the living-room. Then the men, with the exception of Father Lavigny, went off to the dig again.

Father Lavigny took Poirot through into the antika-room and I went with them. I was getting to know the things pretty well by now and I felt a thrill of pride—almost as though it were my own property—when Father Lavigny took down the gold cup and I heard Poirot's exclamation of admiration and pleasure.

'How beautiful! What a work of art!'

Father Lavigny agreed eagerly and began to point out its beauties with real enthusiasm and knowledge.

'No wax on it to-day,' I said.

'Wax?' Poirot stared at me.

'Wax?' So did Father Lavigny.

I explained my remark.

'Ah, *je comprends*,' said Father Lavigny. 'Yes, yes, candle grease.'

That led direct to the subject of the midnight visitor. Forgetting my presence they both dropped into French and I left them together and went back into the living-room.

Mrs. Mercado was darning her husband's socks and Miss Johnson was reading a book. Rather an unusual thing for her. She usually seemed to have something to work at.

After a while Father Lavigny and Poirot came out, and the former excused himself on the score of work. Poirot sat down with us.

'A most interesting man,' he said, and asked how much work there had been for Father Lavigny to do so far.

Miss Johnson explained that tablets had been scarce and that there had been very few inscribed bricks or cylinder seals. Father Lavigny, however, had done his share of work on the dig and was picking up colloquial Arabic very fast.

That led the talk to cylinder seals, and presently Miss Johnson fetched from a cupboard a sheet of impressions made by rolling them out on plasticine.

I realised as we bent over them, admiring the spirited designs, that these must be what she had been working at on that fatal afternoon.

As we talked I noticed that Poirot was rolling and kneading a little ball of plasticine between his fingers.

'You use a lot of plasticine, mademoiselle?' he asked.

'A fair amount. We seem to have got through a lot already this year—though I can't imagine how. But half our supply seems to have gone.'

'Where is it kept, mademoiselle?'

'Here—in this cupboard.'

As she replaced the sheet of impressions she showed him the shelf with rolls of plasticine, Durofix, photographic paste and other stationery supplies.

Poirot stooped down.

'And this—what is this, mademoiselle?'

He had slipped his hand right to the back and had brought out a curious crumpled object.

As he straightened it out we could see that it was a kind of mask, with eyes and mouth crudely painted on in Indian ink and the whole thing roughly smeared with plasticine.

'How perfectly extraordinary,' cried Miss Johnson. 'I've never seen it before. How did it get there? And what is it?'

'As to how it got there, well one hiding-place is as good as another, and I presume that this cupboard would not have been turned out till the end of the season. As to what it is—that, too, I think, is not difficult to say. *We have here the face that Mrs. Leidner described.* The ghostly face seen in the semi-dusk outside her window—without body attached.'

Mrs. Mercado gave a little shriek.

Miss Johnson was white to the lips. She murmured:

'Then it was *not* fancy. It was a trick—a wicked trick! But who played it?'

'Yes,' cried Mrs. Mercado. 'Who could have done such a wicked, wicked thing?'

Poirot did not attempt a reply. His face was very grim as he went into the next room, returned with an empty cardboard box in his hand and put the crumpled mask into it.

'The police must see this,' he explained.

'It's horrible,' said Miss Johnson in a low voice. 'Horrible!'

'Do you think everything's hidden here somewhere?' cried Mrs. Mercado shrilly. 'Do you think perhaps the weapon—the club she was killed with—all covered with blood still, perhaps. . . . Oh! I'm frightened—I'm frightened. . . .'

Miss Johnson gripped her by the shoulder.

'Be quiet,' she said fiercely. 'Here's Dr. Leidner. We mustn't upset him.'

Indeed, at that very moment the car had driven into the courtyard. Dr. Leidner got out of it and came straight across and in at the living-room door. His face was set in lines of fatigue and he looked twice the age he had three days ago.

He said in a quiet voice:

'The funeral will be at eleven o'clock to-morrow. Major Deane will read the service.'

Mrs. Mercado faltered something, then slipped out of the room.

Dr. Leidner said to Miss Johnson:

'You'll come, Anne?'

And she answered.

'Of course, my dear, we'll all come. Naturally.'

She didn't say anything else, but her face must have expressed what her tongue was powerless to do, for his face lightened up with affection and a momentary ease.

'Dear Anne,' he said. 'You are such a wonderful comfort and help to me. My dear old friend.'

He laid his hand on her arm and I saw the red colour creep up in her face as she muttered, gruff as ever: 'That's all right.'

But I just caught a glimpse of her expression and knew that, for one short moment, Anne Johnson was a perfectly happy woman.

And another idea flashed across my mind. Perhaps soon, in the natural course of things, turning to his old friend for sympathy, a new and happy state of things might come about.

Not that I'm really a matchmaker, and of course it was indecent to think of such a thing before the funeral even. But after all, it *would* be a happy solution. He was very fond of her, and there was no doubt she was absolutely devoted to him and would be perfectly happy devoting the rest of her life to him. That is, if she could bear to hear Louise's perfections sung all the time. But women can put up with a lot when they've got what they want.

Dr. Leidner then greeted Poirot, asking him if he had made any progress.

Miss Johnson was standing behind Dr. Leidner and she looked hard at the box in Poirot's hand and shook her head, and I realised that she was pleading with Poirot not to tell him about the mask. She felt, I was sure, that he had enough to bear for one day.

Poirot fell in with her wish.

'These things march slowly, monsieur,' he said.

Then, after a few desultory words, he took his leave.

I accompanied him out to his car.

There were half a dozen things I wanted to ask him, but somehow, when he turned and looked at me, I didn't ask anything after all. I'd as soon have asked a surgeon if he thought he'd made a good job of an operation. I just stood meekly waiting for instructions.

Rather to my surprise he said:

'Take care of yourself, my child.'

And then he added:

'I wonder if it is well for you to remain here?'

'I must speak to Dr. Leidner about leaving,' I said. 'But I thought I'd wait until after the funeral.'

He nodded in approval.

'In the meantime,' he said, 'do not try to find out too much. You understand, I do not want you to be clever!' And he added with a smile, 'It is for you to hold the swabs and for me to do the operation.'

Wasn't it funny, his actually saying that?

Then he said quite irrelevantly:

'An interesting man, that Father Lavigny.'

'A monk being an archaeologist seems odd to me,' I said.

'Ah, yes, you are a Protestant. Me, I am a good Catholic. I know something of priests and monks.'

He frowned, seemed to hesitate, then said: 'Remember, he is quite clever enough to turn you inside out if he likes.'

If he was warning me against gossiping I felt that I didn't need any such warning!

It annoyed me, and though I didn't like to ask him any of the things I really wanted to know, I didn't see why I shouldn't at any rate say one thing.

'You'll excuse me, M. Poirot,' I said. 'But it's "stubbed your toe," not *stepped* or *stebbed*.'

'Ah? Thank you, *ma soeur*.'

'Don't mention it. But it's just as well to get a phrase right.'

'I will remember,' he said—quite meekly for him.

And he got in the car and was driven away, and I went slowly back across the courtyard wondering about a lot of things.

About the hypodermic marks on Mr. Mercado's arm, and what drug it was he took. And about that horrid yellow smeared mask. And how odd it was that Poirot and Miss Johnson hadn't heard my cry in the living-room that morning, whereas we had all heard Poirot perfectly well in the dining-room at lunch time—and yet Father Lavigny's room and Mrs. Leidner's were just the same distance from the living-room and the dining-room respectively.

And then I felt rather pleased that I'd taught *Doctor* Poirot one English phrase correctly!

Even if he *was* a great detective he'd realise he *didn't* know *everything*!

CHAPTER XXIII

I GO PSYCHIC

THE FUNERAL WAS, I thought, a very affecting affair. As well as ourselves, all the English people in Hassanieh attended it. Even Sheila Reilly was there, looking quiet and subdued in a dark coat and skirt. I hoped that she was feeling a little remorseful for all the unkind things she had said.

When we got back to the house I followed Dr. Leidner into the office and broached the subject of my departure. He was very nice about it, thanked me for what I had done (Done! I had been worse than useless) and insisted on my accepting an extra week's salary.

I protested because really I felt I'd done nothing to earn it.

'Indeed, Dr. Leidner, I'd rather not have any salary at all. If you'd just refund me my travelling expenses that's all I want.'

But he wouldn't hear of that.

'You see,' I said, 'I don't feel I deserve it, Dr. Leidner. I mean, I've—well, I've failed. She—my coming didn't save her.'

'Now don't get that idea into your head, nurse,' he said earnestly. 'After all, I didn't engage you as a female detective. I never dreamt my wife's life was in danger. I was convinced it was all nerves and that she'd worked herself up into a rather curious mental state. You did all any one could do. She liked and trusted you. And I think in her last days she felt happier and safer because of your being here. There's nothing for you to reproach yourself with.'

His voice quivered a little and I knew what he was thinking. *He* was the one to blame for not having taken Mrs. Leidner's fears seriously.

'Dr. Leidner,' I said curiously. 'Have you ever come to any conclusion about those anonymous letters?'

He said with a sigh:

'I don't know what to believe. Has M. Poirot come to any definite conclusion?'

'He hadn't yesterday,' I said, steering ratherly neatly, I thought, between truth and fiction. After all, he hadn't until I told him about Miss Johnson.

It was on my mind that I'd like to give Dr. Leidner a hint and see if he reacted. In the pleasure of seeing him and Miss Johnson together the day before, and his affection and reliance on her, I'd forgotten all about the letters. Even now I felt it was perhaps rather mean of me to bring it up. Even if she had written them, she had had a bad time after Mrs. Leidner's death. Yet I did want to see whether that particular possibility had ever entered Dr. Leidner's head.

'Anonymous letters are usually the work of a woman,' I said. I wanted to see how he'd take it.

'I suppose they are,' he said with a sigh. 'But you seem to forget, nurse, that these may be genuine. They may actually be written by Frederick Bosner.'

'No, I haven't forgotten,' I said. 'But I can't believe somehow that that's the real explanation.'

'I do,' he said. 'It's all nonsense his being one of the expedition staff. That is just an ingenious theory of M. Poirot's. I believe that the truth is much simpler. The man is a madman, of course. He's been hanging round the place—perhaps in disguise of some kind. And somehow or other he got in on that fatal afternoon. The servants may be lying—they may have been bribed.'

'I suppose it's possible,' I said doubtfully.

Dr. Leidner went on with a trace of irritability.

'It is all very well for M. Poirot to suspect the members of my expedition. I am perfectly certain *none* of them have anything to do with it! I have worked with them. I *know* them!'

He stopped suddenly, then he said:

'Is that your experience, nurse? That anonymous letters are usually written by women?'

'It isn't always the case,' I said. 'But there's a certain type of feminine spitefulness that finds relief that way.'

'I suppose you are thinking of Mrs. Mercado?' he said.

Then he shook his head.

'Even if she were malicious enough to wish to hurt Louise she would hardly have the necessary knowledge,' he said.

I remembered the earlier letters in the attaché case.

If Mrs. Leidner had left that unlocked and Mrs. Mercado had been alone in the house one day pottering about, she might easily have found them and read them. Men never seem to think of the simplest possibilities!

'And apart from her there is only Miss Johnson,' I said, watching him.

'That would be quite ridiculous!'

The little smile with which he said it was quite conclusive. The idea of Miss Johnson being the author of the letters had never entered his head! I hesitated just for a minute—but I didn't say anything.

One doesn't like giving away a fellow woman, and besides, I had been a witness of Miss Johnson's genuine and moving remorse. What was done was done. Why expose Dr. Leidner to a fresh disillusion on top of all his other troubles?

It was arranged that I should leave on the following day, and I had arranged through Dr. Reilly to stay for a day or two with the

matron of the hospital whilst I made arrangements for returning to England either via Baghdad or direct via Nissibin by car and train.

Dr. Leidner was kind enough to say that he would like me to choose a memento from amongst his wife's things.

'Oh, no, really, Dr. Leidner,' I said. 'I couldn't. It's much too kind of you.'

He insisted.

'But I should like you to have something. And Louise, I am sure, would have wished it.'

Then he went on to suggest that I should have her tortoise-shell toilet set!

'Oh, no, Dr. Leidner! Why, that's a most *expensive* set. I couldn't, really.'

'She had no sisters, you know—no one who wants these things. There is no one else to have them.'

I could quite imagine that he wouldn't want them to fall into Mrs. Mercado's greedy little hands. And I didn't think he'd want to offer them to Miss Johnson.

He went on kindly:

'You just think it over. By the way, here is the key of Louise's jewel case. Perhaps you will find something there you would rather have. And I should be very grateful if you would pack up—all—all her clothes. I dare say Reilly can find a use for them amongst some of the poor Christian families in Hassanieh.'

I was very glad to be able to do that for him, and I expressed my willingness.

I set about it at once.

Mrs. Leidner had only had a very simple wardrobe with her and it was soon sorted and packed up into a couple of suitcases. All her papers had been in the small attaché-case. The jewel case contained a few simple trinkets—a pearl ring, a diamond brooch, a small string of pearls and one or two plain gold bar brooches of the safety-pin type, and a string of large amber beads.

Naturally I wasn't going to take the pearls or the diamonds, but I hesitated a bit between the amber beads and the toilet set. In the end, however, I didn't see why I shouldn't take the latter. It was a kindly thought on Dr. Leidner's part, and I was sure there wasn't any patronage about it. I'd take it in the spirit it had been offered without any false pride.

After all, I *had* been fond of her.

Well, that was all done and finished with. The suitcases packed, the jewel case locked up again and put separate to give to Dr. Leidner with the photograph of Mrs. Leidner's father and one or two other personal little odds and ends.

The room looked bare and forlorn emptied of all its accoutrements, when I'd finished. There was nothing more for me to do—and yet somehow or other I shrank from leaving the room. It seemed as though there were something still to do there—something I ought to *see*—or something I ought to have *known*.

I'm not superstitious, but the idea *did* pop into my head that perhaps Mrs. Leidner's spirit was hanging about the room and trying to get in touch with me.

I remember once at the hospital some of us girls got a planchette and really it wrote some very remarkable things.

Perhaps, although I'd never thought of such a thing, I might be mediumistic.

As I say, one gets all worked up to imagine all sorts of foolishness sometimes.

I prowled round the room uneasily, touching this and that. But, of course, there wasn't anything in the room but bare furniture. There was nothing slipped behind drawers or tucked away. I couldn't hope for anything of that kind.

In the end (it sounds rather batty, but as I say, one gets worked up) I did rather a queer thing.

I went and lay down on the bed and closed my eyes.

I deliberately tried to forget who and what I was. I tried to think myself back to that fatal afternoon. I was Mrs. Leidner lying here resting, peaceful and unsuspecting.

It's extraordinary how you *can* work yourself up.

I'm a perfectly normal matter-of-fact individual—not the least little bit spooky, but I tell you that after I'd lain there about five minutes I began to *feel* spooky.

I didn't try to resist. I deliberately encouraged the feeling.

I said to myself:

'I'm Mrs. Leidner. I'm Mrs. Leidner. I'm lying here—half asleep. Presently—very soon now—the door's going to open.'

I kept on saying that—as though I were hypnotising myself.

'It's just about half-past one . . . it's just about the time . . . The door is going to open . . . *the door is going to open*. . . . I shall see who comes in. . . .'

I kept my eyes glued on that door. Presently it was going to open. I should *see* it open. And I should see *the person who opened it*.

I must have been a little over-wrought that afternoon to imagine I could solve the mystery that way.

But I did believe it. A sort of chill passed down my back and settled in my legs. They felt numb—paralysed.

‘You’re going into a trance,’ I said. ‘And in that trance you’ll see . . .’

And once again I repeated monotonously again and again:

‘The door is going to open—the door is going to open . . .’

The cold numbed feeling grew more intense.

And then, slowly, *I saw the door just beginning to open*.

It was horrible.

I’ve never known anything so horrible before or since.

I was paralysed—chilled through and through. I couldn’t move. For the life of me I couldn’t have moved.

And I was terrified. Sick and blind and dumb with terror.

That slowly opening door.

So noiseless.

In a minute I should see . . .

Slowly—slowly—wider and wider.

Bill Coleman came quietly in.

He must have had the shock of his life!

I bounded off the bed with a scream of terror and hurled myself across the room.

He stood stock still, his blunt pink face pinker and his mouth opened wide with surprise.

‘Hallo-allo-allo,’ he said. ‘What’s up, nurse?’

I came back to reality with a crash.

‘Goodness, Mr. Coleman,’ I said. ‘How you startled me!’

‘Sorry,’ he said with a momentary grin.

I saw then that he was holding a little bunch of scarlet ranunculus in his hand. They were pretty little flowers and they grew wild on the sides of the Tell. Mrs. Leidner had been very fond of them.

He blushed and got rather red as he said:

‘One can’t get any flowers or things in Hassanieh. Seemed rather rotten not to have any flowers for the grave. I thought I’d just nip in here and put a little posy in that little pot thing she always had flowers in on her table. Sort of show she wasn’t forgotten—eh? A bit asinine, I know, but—well—I mean to say.’

I thought it was very nice of him. He was all pink with

embarrassment like Englishmen are when they've done anything sentimental. I thought it was a very sweet thought.

'Why, I think that's a very nice idea, Mr. Coleman,' I said.

And I picked up the little pot and went and got some water in it and we put the flowers in.

I really thought much more of Mr. Coleman for this idea of his. It showed he had a heart and nice feelings about things.

He didn't ask me again what made me let out such a squeal and I'm thankful he didn't. I should have felt a fool explaining.

'Stick to common sense in future, woman,' I said to myself as I settled my cuffs and smoothed my apron. 'You're not cut out for this psychic stuff.'

I hustled about doing my own packing and kept myself busy for the rest of the day.

Father Lavigny was kind enough to express great distress at my leaving. He said my cheerfulness and common sense had been such a help to everybody. Common sense! I'm glad he didn't know about my idiotic behaviour in Mrs. Leidner's room.

'We have not seen M. Poirot to-day,' he remarked.

I told him that Poirot had said he was going to be busy all day sending off telegrams.

Father Lavigny raised his eyebrows.

'Telegrams? To America?'

'I suppose so. He said "All over the world!" but I think that was rather a foreign exaggeration.'

And then I got rather red, remembering that Father Lavigny was a foreigner himself.

He didn't seem offended though, just laughed quite pleasantly and asked me if there were any news of the man with the squint.

I said I didn't know but I hadn't heard of any.

Father Lavigny asked me again about the time Mrs. Leidner and I had noticed the man and how he had seemed to be standing on tiptoe and peering through the window.

'It seems clear the man had some overwhelming interest in Mrs. Leidner,' he said thoughtfully. 'I have wondered since whether the man could possibly have been a European got up to look like an Iraqi?'

That was a new idea to me and I considered it carefully. I had taken it for granted that the man was a native, but of course, when I came to think of it, I was really going by the cut of his clothes and the yellowness of his skin.

Father Lavigny declared his intention of going round outside the house to the place where Mrs. Leidner and I had seen the man standing.

'You never know, he might have dropped something. In the detective stories the criminal always does.'

'I expect in real life criminals are more careful,' I said.

I fetched some socks I had just finished darning and put them on the table in the living-room for the men to sort out when they came in, and then, as there was nothing much more to do, I went up on the roof.

Miss Johnson was standing there but she didn't hear me. I got right up to her before she noticed me.

But long before that I'd seen that there was something very wrong.

She was standing in the middle of the roof staring straight in front of her, and there was the most awful look on her face. As though she'd seen something she couldn't possibly believe.

It gave me quite a shock.

Mind you, I'd seen her upset the other evening, but this was quite different.

'My dear,' I said, hurrying to her, 'whatever's the matter?'

She turned her head at that and stood looking at me—almost as if she didn't see me.

'What is it?' I persisted.

She made a queer sort of grimace—as though she were trying to swallow but her throat were too dry. She said hoarsely:

'I've just seen something.'

'What have you seen? Tell me. Whatever can it be? You look all in.'

She gave an effort to pull herself together, but she still looked pretty dreadful.

She said, still in that same dreadful choked voice:

'I've seen how some one could come in from outside—and no one would ever guess.'

I followed the direction of her eyes but I couldn't see anything.

Mr. Reiter was standing in the door of the photographic room and Father Lavigny was just crossing the courtyard—but there was nothing else.

I turned back puzzled and found her eyes fixed on mine with the strangest expression in them.

'Really,' I said, 'I don't see what you mean. Won't you explain?'

But she shook her head.

'Not now. Later. We *ought* to have seen. Oh, we ought to have seen!' 'If you'd only tell me——'

But she shook her head.

'I've got to think it out first.'

And pushing past me, she went stumbling down the stairs.

I didn't follow her as she obviously didn't want me with her. Instead I sat down on the parapet and tried to puzzle things out. But I didn't get anywhere. There was only the one way into the courtyard—through the big arch. Just outside it I could see the water-boy and his horse and the Indian cook talking to him. Nobody could have passed them and come in without their seeing him.

I shook my head in perplexity and went downstairs again.

CHAPTER XXIV

MURDER IS A HABIT

WE ALL WENT TO BED early that night. Miss Johnson had appeared at dinner and had behaved more or less as usual. She had, however, a sort of dazed look, and once or twice quite failed to take in what other people said to her.

It wasn't somehow a very comfortable sort of meal. You'd say, I suppose, that that was natural enough in a house where there'd been a funeral that day. But I know what I mean.

Lately our meals had been hushed and subdued, but for all that there had been a feeling of comradeship. There had been sympathy with Dr. Leidner in his grief and a fellow feeling of being all in the same boat amongst the others.

But to-night I was reminded of my first meal there—when Mrs. Mercado had watched me and there had been that curious feeling as though something might snap any minute.

I'd felt the same thing—only very much intensified—when we'd sat round the dining-room table with Poirot at the head of it.

To-night it was particularly strong. Every one was on edge—jumpy—on tenterhooks. If any one had dropped something I'm sure somebody would have screamed.

As I say, we all separated early afterwards. I went to bed almost at once. The last thing I heard as I was dropping off to sleep was

Mrs. Mercado's voice saying good-night to Miss Johnson just outside my door.

I dropped off to sleep at once—tired by my exertions and even more by my silly experience in Mrs. Leidner's room. I slept heavily and dreamlessly for several hours.

I awoke when I did awake with a start and a feeling of impending catastrophe. Some sound had woken me, and as I sat up in bed listening I heard it again.

An awful sort of agonised choking groan.

I had lit my candle and was out of bed in a twinkling. I snatched up a torch, too, in case the candle should blow out. I came out of my door and stood listening. I knew the sound wasn't far away. It came again—from the room immediately next to mine—Miss Johnson's room.

I hurried in. Miss Johnson was lying in bed, her whole body contorted in agony. As I set down the candle and bent over her, her lips moved and she tried to speak—but only an awful hoarse whisper came. I saw that the corners of her mouth and the skin of her chin were burnt a kind of greyish white.

Her eyes went from me to a glass that lay on the floor evidently where it had dropped from her hand. The light rug was stained a bright red where it had fallen. I picked it up and ran a finger over the inside, drawing back my hand with a sharp exclamation. Then I examined the inside of the poor woman's mouth.

There wasn't the least doubt what was the matter. Somehow or other, intentionally or otherwise, she'd swallowed a quantity of corrosive acid—oxalic or hydrochloric, I suspected.

I ran out and called to Dr. Leidner and he woke the others, and we worked over her for all we were worth, but all the time I had an awful feeling it was no good. We tried a strong solution of carbonate of soda—and followed it with olive oil. To ease the pain I gave her a hypodermic of morphine sulphate.

David Emmott had gone off to Hassanieh to fetch Dr. Reilly, but before he came it was over.

I won't dwell on the details. Poisoning by a strong solution of hydrochloric acid (which is what it proved to be) is one of the most painful deaths possible.

It was when I was bending over her to give her the morphia that she made one ghastly effort to speak. It was only a horrible strangled whisper when it came.



'The window . . .' she said. 'Nurse . . . the window . . .'

But that was all—she couldn't go on. She collapsed completely.

I shall never forget that night. The arrival of Dr. Reilly. The arrival of Captain Maitland. And finally with the dawn, Hercule Poirot.

He it was who took me gently by the arm and steered me into the dining-room where he made me sit down and have a cup of good strong tea.

'There, *mon enfant*,' he said, 'that is better. You are worn out.'

Upon that, I burst into tears.

'It's too awful,' I sobbed. 'It's been like a nightmare. Such awful suffering. And her eyes . . . Oh, M. Poirot—her eyes . . .'

He patted me on the shoulder. A woman couldn't have been kinder.

'Yes, yes—do not think of it. You did all you could.'

'It was one of the corrosive acids.'

'It was a strong solution of hydrochloric acid.'

'The stuff they use on the pots?'

'Yes. Miss Johnson probably drank it off before she was fully awake. That is—unless she took it on purpose.'

'Oh, M. Poirot, what an awful idea!'

'It is a possibility, after all. What do you think?'

I considered for a moment and then shook my head decisively.

'I don't believe it. No, I don't believe it for a moment.' I hesitated and then said, 'I think she found out something yesterday afternoon.'

'What is that you say? She found out something?'

I repeated to him the curious conversation we had had together.

Poirot gave a low soft whistle.

'*La pauvre femme!*' he said. 'She said she wanted to think it over—eh? That is what signed her death warrant. If she had only spoken out—then—at once.'

He said:

'Tell me again her exact words?'

I repeated them.

'She saw how some one could have come in from outside without any of you knowing? Come, *ma soeur*, let us go up to the roof and you shall show me just where she was standing.'

We went up to the roof together and I showed Poirot the exact spot where Miss Johnson had stood.

'Like this?' said Poirot. 'Now what do I see? I see half the

courtyard—and the archway—and the doors of the drawing-office and the photographic room and the laboratory. Was there anyone in the courtyard?’

‘Father Lavigny was just going towards the archway and Mr. Reiter was standing in the door of the photographic room.’

‘And still I do not see in the least how any one could come in from outside and none of you know about it. . . . But *she* saw . . .’

He gave it up at last, shaking his head.

‘*Sacré nom d’un chien—va!* What *did* she see?’

The sun was just rising. The whole eastern sky was a riot of rose and orange and pale, pearly grey.

‘What a beautiful sunrise,’ said Poirot gently.

The river wound away to our left and the Tell stood up outlined in gold colour. To the south were the blossoming trees and the peaceful cultivation. The water-wheel groaned in the distance—a faint unearthly sound. In the north were the slender minarets and the clustering fairy whiteness of Hassanieh.

It was all incredibly beautiful.

And then, close at my elbow, I heard Poirot give a long deep sigh.

‘Fool that I have been,’ he murmured. ‘When the truth is so clear—so clear.’

CHAPTER XXV

SUICIDE OR MURDER

I HADN’T TIME to ask Poirot what he meant, for Captain Maitland was calling up to us and asking us to come down.

We hurried down the stairs.

‘Look here, Poirot,’ he said. ‘Here’s another complication. The monk fellow is missing.’

‘Father Lavigny?’

‘Yes. Nobody noticed it till just now. Then it dawned on somebody that he was the only one of the party not around, and we went to his room. His bed’s not been slept in and there’s no sign of him.’

The whole thing was like a bad dream. First Miss Johnson’s death and then the disappearance of Father Lavigny.

The servants were called and questioned, but they couldn’t throw any light on the mystery. He had last been seen at about eight o’clock

the night before. Then he had said he was going out for a stroll before going to bed.

Nobody had seen him come back from that stroll.

The big doors had been closed and barred at nine o'clock as usual. Nobody, however, remembered unbarring them in the morning. The two house-boys each thought the other one must have done the unfastening.

Had Father Lavigny ever returned the night before? Had he, in the course of his earlier walk, discovered anything of a suspicious nature, gone out to investigate it later, and perhaps fallen a third victim?

Captain Maitland swung round as Dr. Reilly came up with Mr. Mercado behind him.

'Hallo, Reilly. Got anything?'

'Yes. The stuff came from the laboratory here. I've just been checking up the quantities with Mercado. It's H.C.L. from the lab.'

'The laboratory—eh? Was it locked up?'

Mr. Mercado shook his head. His hands were shaking and his face was twitching. He looked a wreck of a man.

'It's never been the custom,' he stammered. 'You see—just now—we're using it all the time. I—nobody ever dreamt——'

'Is the place locked up at night?'

'Yes—all the rooms are locked. The keys are hung up just inside the living-room.'

'So if any one had a key to that they could get the lot.'

'Yes.'

'And it's a perfectly ordinary key, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Nothing to show whether she took it herself from the laboratory?' asked Captain Maitland.

'She didn't,' I said loudly and positively.

I felt a warning touch on my arm. Poirot was standing close behind me.

And then something rather ghastly happened.

Not ghastly in itself—in fact it was just the incongruousness that made it seem worse than anything else.

A car drove into the courtyard and a little man jumped out. He was wearing a sun helmet and a short thick trench coat.

He came straight to Dr. Leidner, who was standing by Dr. Reilly, and shook him warmly by the hand.

'*Vous voilà, mon cher,*' he cried. 'Delighted to see you. I passed this way on Saturday afternoon—en route to the Italians at Fugima. I went to the dig but there wasn't a single European about and alas! I cannot speak Arabic. I had not time to come to the house. This morning I leave Fugima at five—two hours here with you—and then I catch the convoy on. *Eh bien*, and how is the season going?'

It was ghastly.

The cheery voice, the matter-of-fact manner, all the pleasant sanity of an everyday world now left far behind. He just bustled in, knowing nothing and noticing nothing—full of cheerful bonhomie.

No wonder Dr. Leidner gave an inarticulate gasp and looked in mute appeal at Dr. Reilly.

The doctor rose to the occasion.

He took the little man (he was a French archaeologist called Verrier who dug in the Greek islands, I heard later) aside and explained to him what had occurred.

Verrier was horrified. He himself had been staying at an Italian dig right away from civilisation for the last few days and had heard nothing.

He was profuse in condolences and apologies, finally striding over to Dr. Leidner and clasping him warmly by both hands.

'What a tragedy! My God, what a tragedy! I have no words. *Mon pauvre collègue.*'

And shaking his head in one last ineffectual effort to express his feelings, the little man climbed into his car and left us.

As I say, that momentary introduction of comic relief into tragedy seemed really more gruesome than anything else that had happened.

'The next thing,' said Dr. Reilly firmly, 'is breakfast. Yes, I insist. Come, Leidner, you must eat.'

Poor Dr. Leidner was almost a complete wreck. He came with us to the dining-room and there a funereal meal was served. I think the hot coffee and fried eggs did us all good, though no one actually felt they wanted to eat. Dr. Leidner drank some coffee and sat twiddling his bread. His face was grey, drawn with pain and bewilderment.

After breakfast, Captain Maitland got down to things.

I explained how I had woken up, heard a queer sound and had gone into Miss Johnson's room.

'You say there was a glass on the floor?'

'Yes. She must have dropped it after drinking.'

'Was it broken?'

'No, it had fallen on the rug. (I'm afraid the acid's ruined the rug, by the way.) I picked the glass up and put it back on the table.'

'I'm glad you've told us that. There are only two sets of fingerprints on it, and one set is certainly Miss Johnson's own. The other must be yours.'

He was silent for a moment, then he said:

'Please go on.'

I described carefully what I'd done and the methods I had tried, looking rather anxiously at Dr. Reilly for approval. He gave it with a nod.

'You tried everything that could possibly have done any good,' he said. And though I was pretty sure I had done so, it was a relief to have my belief confirmed.

'Did you know exactly what she had taken?' Captain Maitland asked.

'No—but I could see, of course, that it was a corrosive acid.'

Captain Maitland asked gravely:

'Is it your opinion, nurse, that Miss Johnson deliberately administered this stuff to herself?'

'Oh, no,' I exclaimed. 'I never thought of such a thing!'

I don't know why I was so sure. Partly, I think, because of M. Poirot's hints. His 'murder is a habit' had impressed itself on my mind. And then one doesn't readily believe that any one's going to commit suicide in such a terribly painful way.

I said as much and Captain Maitland nodded thoughtfully.

'I agree that it isn't what one would choose,' he said. 'But if any one were in great distress of mind and this stuff were easily available it might be taken for that reason.'

'Was she in great distress of mind?' I asked doubtfully.

'Mrs. Mercado says so. She says that Miss Johnson was quite unlike herself at dinner last night—that she hardly replied to anything that was said to her. Mrs. Mercado is quite sure that Miss Johnson was in terrible distress over something and that the idea of making away with herself had already occurred to her.'

'Well, I don't believe it for a moment,' I said bluntly.

Mrs. Mercado indeed! Nasty slinking little cat!

'Then what *do* you think?'

'I think she was murdered,' I said bluntly.

He rapped out his next question sharply. I felt rather that I was in the orderly room.

'Any reasons?'

'It seems to me by far and away the most possible solution.'

'That's just your private opinion. There was no reason why the lady should be murdered?'

'Excuse me,' I said, 'there was. She found out something.'

'Found out something? What did she find out?'

I repeated our conversation on the roof word for word.

'She refused to tell you what her discovery was?'

'Yes. She said she must have time to think it over.'

'But she was very excited by it?'

'Yes.'

'*A way of getting in from outside,*' Captain Maitland puzzled over it, his brows knit. 'Had you no idea at all of what she was driving at?'

'Not in the least. I puzzled and puzzled over it but I couldn't even get a glimmering.'

Captain Maitland said:

'What do you think, M. Poirot?'

Poirot said:

'I think you have there a possible motive.'

'For murder?'

'For murder.'

Captain Maitland frowned.

'She wasn't able to speak before she died?'

'Yes, she just managed to get out two words.'

'What were they?'

'*The window . . .*'

'The window?' repeated Captain Maitland. 'Did you understand to what she was referring?'

I shook my head.

'How many windows were there in her bedroom?'

'Just the one.'

'Giving on the courtyard?'

'Yes.'

'Was it open or shut? Open, I seem to remember. But perhaps one of you opened it?'

'No, it was open all the time. I wondered——'

I stopped.

'Go on, nurse.'

'I examined the window, of course, but I couldn't see anything

unusual about it. I wondered whether, perhaps, somebody changed the glasses that way.'

'Changed the glasses?'

'Yes. You see, Miss Johnson always takes a glass of water to bed with her. I think that glass must have been tampered with and a glass of acid put there in its place.'

'What do you say, Reilly?'

'If it's murder, that was probably the way it was done,' said Dr. Reilly promptly. 'No ordinary moderately observant human being would drink a glass of acid in mistake for one of water—if they were in full possession of their waking faculties. But if any one's accustomed to drinking off a glass of water in the middle of the night, that person might easily stretch out an arm, find the glass in the accustomed place, and still half asleep, toss off enough of the stuff to be fatal before realising what had happened.'

Captain Maitland reflected a minute.

'I'll have to go back and look at that window. How far is it from the head of the bed?'

I thought.

'With a very long stretch you could just reach the little table that stands by the head of the bed.'

'The table on which the glass of water was?'

'Yes.'

'Was the door locked?'

'No.'

'So whoever it was could have come in that way and made the substitution?'

'Oh yes.'

'There would be more risk that way,' said Dr. Reilly. 'A person who is sleeping quite soundly will often wake up at the sound of a footfall. If the table could be reached from the window it would be the safer way.'

'I'm not only thinking of the glass,' said Captain Maitland absent-mindedly.

Rousing himself, he addressed me once again.

'It's your opinion that when the poor lady felt she was dying she was anxious to let you know that somebody had substituted acid for water through the open window? Surely the person's *name* would have been more to the point?'

'She mayn't have known the name,' I pointed out.

'Or it would have been more to the point if she'd managed to hint what it was that she had discovered the day before?'

Dr. Reilly said:

'When you're dying, Maitland, you haven't always got a sense of proportion. One particular fact very likely obsesses your mind. That a murderous hand had come through the window may have been the principal fact obsessing her at the minute. It may have seemed to her important that she should let people know that. In my opinion she wasn't far wrong either. It *was* important! She probably jumped to the fact that you'd think it was suicide. If she could have used her tongue freely, she'd probably have said "It wasn't suicide. I didn't take it myself. Somebody else must have put it near my bed *through the window.*"'

Captain Maitland drummed with his fingers for a minute or two without replying. Then he said:

'There are certainly two ways of looking at it. It's either suicide or murder. Which do you think, Dr. Leidner?'

Dr. Leidner was silent for a minute or two, then he said quietly and decisively:

'Murder. Anne Johnson wasn't the sort of woman to kill herself.'

'No,' allowed Captain Maitland. 'Not in the normal run of things. But there might be circumstances in which it would be quite a natural thing to do.'

'Such as?'

Captain Maitland stooped to a bundle which I had previously noticed him place by the side of his chair. He swung it on to the table with something of an effort.

'There's something here that none of you know about,' he said. 'We found it under her bed.'

He fumbled with the knot of the covering, then threw it back revealing a heavy great quern or grinder.

That was nothing in itself—there were a dozen or so already found in the course of the excavations.

What riveted our attention on this particular specimen was a dull, dark stain and a fragment of something that looked like hair.

'That'll be your job, Reilly,' said Captain Maitland. 'But I shouldn't say that there's much doubt about this being the instrument with which Mrs. Leidner was killed!'

CHAPTER XXVI

NEXT IT WILL BE ME!

IT WAS RATHER HORRIBLE. Dr. Leidner looked as though he were going to faint and I felt a bit sick myself.

Dr. Reilly examined it with professional gusto.

'No fingerprints, I presume?' he threw out.

'No fingerprints.'

Dr. Reilly took out a pair of forceps and investigated delicately.

'H'm—a fragment of human tissue—and hair—fair blonde hair.

That's the unofficial verdict. Of course, I'll have to make a proper test, blood group, etc., but there's not much doubt. Found under Miss Johnson's bed? Well, well—so *that's* the big idea. She did the murder, and then, God rest her, remorse came to her and she finished herself off. It's a theory—a pretty theory.'

Dr. Leidner could only shake his head helplessly.

'Not Anne—not Anne,' he murmured.

'I don't know where she hid this to begin with,' said Captain Maitland. 'Every room was searched after the first crime.'

Something jumped into my mind and I thought, 'In the stationery cupboard,' but I didn't say anything.

'Wherever it was, she became dissatisfied with its hiding-place and took it into her own room, which had been searched with all the rest. Or perhaps she did that after making up her mind to commit suicide.'

'I don't believe it,' I said aloud.

And I couldn't somehow believe that kind nice Miss Johnson had battered out Mrs. Leidner's brains. I just couldn't *see* it happening! And yet it *did* fit in with some things—her fit of weeping that night, for instance. After all, I'd said 'remorse' myself—only I'd never thought it was remorse for anything but the smaller, more insignificant crime.

'I don't know what to believe,' said Captain Maitland. 'There's the French Father's disappearance to be cleared up too. My men are out hunting around in case he's been knocked on the head and his body rolled into a convenient irrigation ditch.'

'Oh! I remember now——' I began.

Every one looked towards me inquiringly.

'It was yesterday afternoon,' I said. 'He'd been cross-questioning

me about the man with a squint who was looking in at the window that day. He asked me just where he'd stood on the path and then he said he was going out to have a look round. He said in detective stories the criminal always dropped a convenient clue.'

'Damned if any of my criminals ever do,' said Captain Maitland. 'So that's what he was after, was it? By jove, I wonder if he *did* find anything. A bit of a coincidence if both he and Miss Johnson discovered a clue to the identity of the murderer at practically the same time.'

He added irritably, 'Man with a squint? Man with a squint? There's more in this tale of that fellow with a squint than meets the eye. I don't know why the devil my fellows can't lay hold of him?'

'Probably because he hasn't got a squint,' said Poirot quietly.

'Do you mean he faked it? Didn't know you could fake an actual squint.'

Poirot merely said: 'A squint can be a very useful thing.'

'The devil it can! I'd give a lot to know where that fellow is now, squint or no squint!'

'At a guess,' said Poirot, 'he has already passed the Syrian frontier.'

'We've warned Tell Kotchek and Abu Kemal—all the frontier posts, in fact.'

'I should imagine that he took the route through the hills. The route lorries sometimes take when running contraband.'

Captain Maitland grunted.

'Then we'd better telegraph Deir ez Zor?'

'I did so yesterday—warning them to look out for a car with two men in it whose passports will be in the most impeccable order.'

Captain Maitland favoured him with a stare.

'*You* did, did you? Two men—eh?'

Poirot nodded.

'There are two men in this.'

'It strikes me, M. Poirot, that you've been keeping quite a lot of things up your sleeve.'

Poirot shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'Not really. The truth came to me only this morning when I was watching the sun rise. A very beautiful sunrise.'

I don't think that any of us had noticed that Mrs. Mercado was in the room. She must have crept in when we were all taken aback by the production of that horrible great bloodstained stone.

But now, without the least warning, she set up a noise like a pig having its throat cut.

'Oh, my God!' she cried. 'I see it all. I see it all now. *It was Father Lavigny*. He's mad—religious mania. He thinks women are sinful. *He's killing them all*. First Mrs. Leidner—then Miss Johnson. And next it will be *me*. . . .'

With a scream of frenzy she flung herself across the room and clutched at Dr. Reilly's coat.

'I won't stay here, I tell you! I won't stay here a day longer. There's danger. There's danger all round. He's hiding somewhere—waiting his time. He'll spring out on me!'

Her mouth opened and she began screaming again.

I hurried over to Dr. Reilly, who had caught her by the wrists. I gave her a sharp slap on each cheek and with Dr. Reilly's help I sat her down in a chair.

'Nobody's going to kill you,' I said. 'We'll see to that. Sit down and behave yourself.'

She didn't scream any more. Her mouth closed and she sat looking at me with startled, stupid eyes.

Then there was another interruption. The door opened and Sheila Reilly came in.

Her face was pale and serious. She came straight to Poirot.

'I was at the post office early, M. Poirot,' she said, 'and there was a telegram there for you—so I brought it along.'

'Thank you, mademoiselle.'

He took it from her and tore it open while she watched his face.

It did not change, that face. He read the telegram, smoothed it out, folded it up neatly and put it in his pocket.

Mrs. Mercado was watching him. She said in a choked voice:

'Is that—from America?'

He shook his head.

'No, madame,' he said. 'It is from Tunis.'

She stared at him for a moment as though she did not understand, then with a long sigh, she leant back in her seat.

'Father Lavigny,' she said. 'I *was* right. I've always thought there was something queer about him. He said things to me once . . . I suppose he's mad. . . .' She paused and then said, 'I'll be quiet. But I *must* leave this place. Joseph and I can go in and sleep at the Rest House.'

'Patience, madame,' said Poirot. 'I will explain everything.'

Captain Maitland was looking at him curiously.

'Do you consider you've definitely got the hang of this business?' he demanded.

Poirot bowed.

It was a most theatrical bow. I think it rather annoyed Captain Maitland.

'Well,' he barked. 'Out with it, man.'

But that wasn't the way Hercule Poirot did things. I saw perfectly well that he meant to make a song and dance of it. I wondered if he really *did* know the truth, or if he was just showing off.

He turned to Dr. Reilly.

'Will you be so good, Dr. Reilly, as to summon the others?'

Dr. Reilly jumped up and went off obligingly. In a minute or two the other members of the expedition began to file into the room. First Reiter and Emmott. Then Bill Coleman. Then Richard Carey and finally Mr. Mercado.

Poor man, he really looked like death. I suppose he was mortally afraid that he'd get hauled over the coals for carelessness in leaving dangerous chemicals about.

Every one seated themselves round the table very much as we had done on the day M. Poirot arrived. Both Bill Coleman and David Emmott hesitated before they sat down, glancing towards Sheila Reilly. She had her back to them and was standing looking out of the window.

'Chair, Sheila?' said Bill.

David Emmott said in his low pleasant drawl, 'Won't you sit down?'

She turned then and stood for a minute looking at them. Each was indicating a chair, pushing it forward. I wondered whose chair she would accept.

In the end she accepted neither.

'I'll sit here,' she said brusquely. And she sat down on the edge of a table quite close to the window.

'That is,' she added, 'if Captain Maitland doesn't mind my staying?'

I'm not quite sure what Captain Maitland would have said. Poirot forestalled him.

'Stay by all means, mademoiselle,' he said. 'It is, indeed, necessary that you should.'

She raised her eyebrows.

'Necessary?'

'That is the word I used, mademoiselle. There are some questions I shall have to ask you.'

Again her eyebrows went up but she said nothing further. She turned her face to the window as though determined to ignore what went on in the room behind her.

‘And now,’ said Captain Maitland, ‘perhaps we shall get at the truth!’

He spoke rather impatiently. He was essentially a man of action. At this very moment I feel sure that he was fretting to be out and doing things—directing the search for Father Lavigny’s body, or alternatively sending out parties for his capture and arrest.

He looked at Poirot with something akin to dislike.

‘If the beggar’s got anything to say, why doesn’t he say it?’

I could see the words on the tip of his tongue.

Poirot gave a slow appraising glance at us all, then rose to his feet.

I don’t know what I expected him to say—something dramatic certainly. He was that kind of person.

But I certainly didn’t expect him to start off with a phrase in Arabic.

Yet that is what happened. He said the words slowly and solemnly—and really quite religiously, if you know what I mean.

‘*Bismillahi ar rahman ar rahim.*’

And then he gave the translation in English.

‘In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.’

CHAPTER XXVII

BEGINNING OF A JOURNEY

‘BISMILLAHI AR RAHMAN AR RAHIM. That is the Arab phrase used before starting out on a journey. *Eh bien*, we too, start on a journey. A journey into the past. A journey into the strange places of the human soul.’

I don’t think that up till that moment I’d ever felt any of the so-called ‘glamour of the East.’ Frankly, what had struck me was the *mess* everywhere. But suddenly, with M. Poirot’s words, a queer sort of vision seemed to grow up before my eyes. I thought of words like Samarkand and Ispahan—and of merchants with long beards—and kneeling camels—and staggering porters carrying great bales on their backs held by a rope round the forehead—and women with henna-stained hair and tattooed faces kneeling by the Tigris and washing clothes, and I heard their queer, wailing chants and the far-off groaning of the water-wheel. . . .

They were mostly things I'd seen and heard and thought nothing much of. But now, somehow they seemed *different*—like a piece of fusty old stuff you take into the light and suddenly see the rich colours of an old embroidery. . . .

Then I looked round the room we were sitting in and I got a queer feeling that what M. Poirot said was true—we *were* all starting on a journey. We were here together now, but we were all going our different ways.

And I looked at everyone as though, in a sort of way, I were seeing them for the first time—and for the last time—which sounds stupid, but it was what I felt all the same.

Mr. Mercado was twisting his fingers nervously—his queer light eyes with their dilated pupils were staring at Poirot. Mrs. Mercado was looking at her husband. She had a strange watchful look like a tigress waiting to spring. Dr. Leidner seemed to have shrunk in some curious fashion. This last blow had just crumpled him up. You might almost say he wasn't in the room at all. He was somewhere far away in a place of his own. Mr. Coleman was looking straight at Poirot. His mouth was slightly open and his eyes protruded. He looked almost idiotic. Mr. Emmott was looking down at his feet and I couldn't see his face properly. Mr. Reiter looked bewildered. His mouth was pushed out in a pout and that made him look more like a nice clean pig than ever. Miss Reilly was looking steadily out of the window. I don't know what she was thinking or feeling. Then I looked at Mr. Carey, and somehow his face hurt me and I looked away. There we were, all of us. And somehow I felt that when M. Poirot had finished we'd all be somewhere quite different. . . .

It was a queer feeling. . . .

Poirot's voice went quietly on. It was like a river running evenly between its banks . . . running to the sea. . . .

'From the very beginning, I have felt that to understand this case one must seek not for external signs or clues, but for the truer clues of the clash of personalities and the secrets of the heart.

'And I may say that though I have now arrived at what I believe to be the true solution of the case, *I have no material proof of it. I know it is so, because it must be so, because in no other way can every single fact fit into its ordered and recognised place.*

'And that, to my mind, is the most satisfying solution there can be.'

He paused and then went on:

'I will start my journey at the moment when I myself was brought

into the case—when I had it presented to me as an accomplished happening. Now, every case, in my opinion, has a definite *shape* and *form*. The pattern of this case, to my mind, all revolved round the personality of Mrs. Leidner. Until I knew *exactly what kind of a woman Mrs. Leidner was* I should not be able to know why she was murdered and who murdered her.

‘That, then, was my starting point—the personality of Mrs. Leidner.

‘There was also one other psychological point of interest—the curious state of tension described as existing amongst the members of the expedition. This was attested to by several different witnesses—some of them outsiders—and I made a note that although hardly a starting point, it should nevertheless be borne in mind during my investigations.

‘The accepted idea seemed to be that it was directly the result of Mrs. Leidner’s influence on the members of the expedition, but for reasons which I will outline to you later this did not seem to me entirely acceptable.

‘To start with, as I say I concentrated solely and entirely on the personality of Mrs. Leidner. I had various means of assessing that personality. There were the reactions she produced in a number of people, all varying widely in character and temperament, and there was what I could glean by my own observation. The scope of the latter was naturally limited. But I *did* learn certain facts.

‘Mrs. Leidner’s tastes were simple and even on the austere side. She was clearly not a luxurious woman. On the other hand, some embroidery she had been doing was of an extreme fineness and beauty. That indicated a woman of fastidious and artistic taste. From the observation of the books in her bedroom I formed a further estimate. She had brains, and I also fancied that she was, essentially, an egoist.

‘It had been suggested to me that Mrs. Leidner was a woman whose main preoccupation was to attract the opposite sex—that she was, in fact, a sensual woman. This I did not believe to be the case.

‘In her bedroom I noticed the following books on a shelf: *Who Were the Greeks?* *Introduction to Relativity*, *Life of Lady Hester Stanhope*, *Back to Methuselah?* *Linda Condon*, *Crewe Train*.

‘She had, to begin with, an interest in culture and in modern science—that is, a distinct intellectual side. Of the novels *Linda Condon*, and in a lesser degree *Crewe Train*, seemed to show that Mrs. Leidner had a sympathy and interest in the independent woman—unencumbered or entrapped by man. She was also obviously

interested by the personality of Lady Hester Stanhope. *Linda Condon* is an exquisite study of the worship of her own beauty by a woman. *Crewe Train* is a study of a passionate individualist. *Back to Methuselah* is in sympathy with the intellectual rather than the emotional attitude to life. I felt that I was beginning to understand the dead woman.

'I next studied the reactions of those who had formed Mrs. Leidner's immediate circle—and my picture of the dead woman grew more and more complete.

'It was quite clear to me from the accounts of Dr. Reilly and others that Mrs. Leidner was one of those women who are endowed by Nature not only with beauty but with the kind of calamitous magic which sometimes accompanies beauty and can, indeed, exist independently of it. Such women usually leave a trail of violent happenings behind them. They bring disaster—sometimes on others—sometimes on themselves.

'I was convinced that Mrs. Leidner was a woman who essentially worshipped *herself* and who enjoyed more than anything else the sense of *power*. Wherever she was, she *must* be the centre of the universe. And every one round her, man or woman, had got to acknowledge her sway. With some people that was easy. Nurse Leatheran, for instance, a generous-natured woman with a romantic imagination, was captured instantly and gave in ungrudging manner full appreciation. But there was a second way in which Mrs. Leidner exercised her sway—the way of fear. Where conquest was too easy she indulged a more cruel side to her nature—but I wish to reiterate emphatically that it was not what you might call *conscious* cruelty. It was as natural and unthinking as is the conduct of a cat with a mouse. Where consciousness came in, she was essentially kind and would often go out of her way to do kind and thoughtful actions for other people.

'Now of course the first and most important problem to solve was the problem of the anonymous letters. Who had written them and why? I asked myself: Had Mrs. Leidner written them *herself*?

'To answer this problem it was necessary to go back a long way—to go back, in fact, to the date of Mrs. Leidner's first marriage. It is here we start on our journey proper. The journey of Mrs. Leidner's life.

'First of all we must realise that the Louise Leidner of all those years ago is essentially the same Louise Leidner of the present time.

'She was young then, of remarkable beauty—that same haunting beauty that affects a man's spirit and senses as no mere material beauty can—and she was already essentially an egoist.

‘Such women naturally revolt from the idea of marriage. They may be attracted by men, but they prefer to belong to themselves. They are truly *La Belle Dame sans Merci* of the legend. Nevertheless Mrs. Leidner *did* marry—and we can assume, I think, that her husband must have been a man of a certain force of character.

‘Then the revelation of his traitorous activities occurs and Mrs. Leidner acts in the way she told Nurse Leatheran. She gave information to the Government.

‘Now I submit that there was a psychological significance in her action. She told Nurse Leatheran that she was a very patriotic idealistic girl and that that feeling was the cause of her action. But it is a well-known fact that we all tend to deceive ourselves as to the motives for our own actions. Instinctively we select the best-sounding motive! Mrs. Leidner may have believed herself that it was patriotism that inspired her action, but I believe myself that it was really the outcome of an unacknowledged desire to get rid of her husband! She disliked domination—she disliked the feeling of belonging to some one else—in fact she disliked playing second fiddle. She took a patriotic way of regaining her freedom.

‘But underneath her consciousness was a gnawing sense of guilt which was to play its part in her future destiny.

‘We now come directly to the question of the letters. Mrs. Leidner was highly attractive to the male sex. On several occasions she was attracted by them—but in each case a threatening letter played its part and the affair came to nothing.

‘Who wrote those letters? Frederick Bosner or his brother William or *Mrs. Leidner herself*?

‘There is a perfectly good case for either theory. It seems clear to me that Mrs. Leidner was one of those women who do inspire devouring devotions in men, the type of devotion which can become an obsession. I find it quite possible to believe in a Frederick Bosner to whom Louise, his wife, mattered more than anything in the world! She had betrayed him once and he dared not approach her openly, but he was determined at least that she should be his or no one’s. He preferred her death to her belonging to another man.

‘On the other hand, if Mrs. Leidner had, deep down, a dislike of entering into the marriage bond, it is possible that she took this way of extricating herself from difficult positions. She was a huntress who, the prey once attained, had no further use for it! Craving drama in her life, she invented a highly satisfactory drama—a resurrected husband for-

bidding the banns! It satisfied her deepest instincts. It made her a romantic figure, a tragic heroine, and it enabled her not to marry again.

'This state of affairs continued over a number of years. Every time there was any likelihood of marriage—a threatening letter arrived.

'But now we come to a really interesting point. Dr. Leidner came upon the scene—and no forbidding letter arrived! Nothing stood in the way of her becoming Mrs. Leidner. Not until *after* her marriage did a letter arrive.

'At once we ask ourselves—why?

'Let us take each theory in turn.

'If Mrs. Leidner wrote the letters herself the problem is easily explained. Mrs. Leidner really *wanted* to marry Dr. Leidner. And so she *did* marry him. But in that case, *why did she write herself a letter afterwards?* Was her craving for drama too strong to be suppressed? And why only those two letters? After that no other letter was received until a year and a half later.

'Now take the other theory, that the letters were written by her first husband, Frederick Bosner (or his brother). Why did the threatening letter arrive *after* the marriage? Presumably Frederick could not have *wanted* her to marry Leidner. Why, then, did he not stop the marriage? He had done so successfully on former occasions. And why, *having waited till the marriage had taken place*, did he then resume his threats?

'The answer, an unsatisfactory one, is that he was somehow or other unable to protest sooner. He may have been in prison or he may have been abroad.

'There is next the attempted gas poisoning to consider. It seems extremely unlikely that it was brought about by an outside agency. The likely persons to have staged it were Dr. and Mrs. Leidner themselves. There seems no conceivable reason why *Dr. Leidner* should do such a thing, so we are brought to the conclusion that *Mrs. Leidner* planned and carried it out herself.

'Why? More drama?

'After that Dr. and Mrs. Leidner go abroad and for eighteen months they lead a happy, peaceful life with no threats of death to disturb it. They put that down to having successfully covered their traces, but such an explanation is quite absurd. In these days going abroad is quite inadequate for that purpose. And especially was that so in the case of the Leidners. He was the director of a museum expedition. By inquiry at the museum, Frederick Bosner could at once have obtained his correct address. Even granting that he was in too reduced circum-

stances to pursue the couple himself, there would be no bar to his continuing his threatening letters. And it seems to me that a man with his obsession would certainly have done so.

'Instead nothing is heard of him until nearly two years later when the letters are resumed.

'*Why* were the letters resumed?

'A very difficult question—most easily answered by saying that Mrs. Leidner was bored and wanted more drama. But I was not quite satisfied with that. This particular form of drama seemed to me a shade too vulgar and too crude to accord well with her fastidious personality.

'The only thing to do was to keep an open mind on the question.

'There were three definite possibilities: (1) the letters were written by Mrs. Leidner herself; (2) they were written by Frederick Bosner (or young William Bosner); (3) they might have been written *originally* by either Mrs. Leidner on her first husband, but they were now *forgeries*—that is, they were being written by a *third* person who was aware of the earlier letters.

'I now come to direct consideration of Mrs. Leidner's entourage.

'I examined first the actual opportunities that each member of the staff had had for committing the murder.

'Roughly, on the face of it, *any one* might have committed it (as far as opportunity went), with the exception of three persons.

'Dr. Leidner, by overwhelming testimony, had never left the roof. Mr. Carey was on duty at the mound. Mr. Coleman was in Hassanieh.

'But those alibis, my friends, were not *quite* as good as they looked. I except Dr. Leidner's. There is absolutely no doubt that he was on the roof all the time and did not come down until quite an hour and a quarter after the murder had happened.

'But was it *quite* certain that Mr. Carey was on the mound all the time?

'And had Mr. Coleman *actually been in Hassanieh* at the time the murder took place?'

Bill Coleman reddened, opened his mouth, shut it and looked round uneasily.

Mr. Carey's expression did not change.

Poirot went on smoothly.

'I also considered one other person who, I satisfied myself, would be perfectly capable of committing murder *if she felt strongly enough*. Miss Reilly has courage and brains and a certain quality of ruthlessness. When Miss Reilly was speaking to me on the subject of the dead woman,

I said to her, jokingly, that I hoped she had an alibi. I think Miss Reilly was conscious then that she had had in her heart the desire, at least, to kill. At any rate she immediately uttered a very silly and purposeless lie. She said she had been playing tennis on that afternoon. The next day I learned from a casual conversation with Miss Johnson that far from playing tennis, Miss Reilly *had actually been near this house at the time of the murder*. It occurred to me that Miss Reilly, if not guilty of the crime, might be able to tell me something useful.'

He stopped and then said quietly:

'Will you tell us, Miss Reilly, what you *did* see that afternoon?'

The girl did not answer at once. She still looked out of the window without turning her head, and when she spoke it was in a detached and measured voice.

'I rode out to the dig after lunch. It must have been about a quarter to two when I got there.'

'Did you find any of your friends on the dig?'

'No, there seemed to be no one there but the Arab foreman.'

'You did not see Mr. Carey?'

'No.'

'Curious,' said Poirot. 'No more did M. Verrier when he went there that same afternoon.'

He looked invitingly at Carey, but the latter neither moved nor spoke.

'Have you any explanation, Mr. Carey?'

'I went for a walk. There was nothing of interest turning up.'

'In which direction did you go for a walk?'

'Down by the river.'

'Not back towards the house?'

'No.'

'I suppose,' said Miss Reilly, 'that you were waiting for some one who didn't come.'

He looked at her but didn't answer.

Poirot did not press the point. He spoke once more to the girl.

'Did you see anything else, mademoiselle?'

'Yes. I was not far from the expedition house when I noticed the expedition lorry drawn up in a wadi. I thought it was rather queer. Then I saw Mr. Coleman. He was walking along with his head down as though he were searching for something.'

'Look here,' burst out Mr. Coleman, 'I——'

Poirot stopped him with an authoritative gesture.

'Wait. Did you speak to him, Miss Reilly?'

'No, I didn't.'

'Why?'

The girl said slowly:

'Because, from time to time, he started and looked round with an extraordinary furtive look. It—gave me an unpleasant feeling. I turned my horse's head and rode away. I don't think he saw me. I was not very near and he was absorbed in what he was doing.'

'Look here,' Mr. Coleman was not to be hushed any longer. 'I've got a perfectly good explanation for what—I admit—looks a bit fishy. As a matter of fact, the day before I had slipped a jolly fine cylinder seal into my coat pocket instead of putting it in the antika-room—forgot all about it. And then I discovered I'd been and lost it out of my pocket—dropped it somewhere. I didn't want to get into a row about it so I decided I'd have a jolly good search on the quiet. I was pretty sure I'd dropped it on the way to or from the dig. I rushed over my business in Hassanieh. Sent a walad to do some of the shopping and got back early. I stuck the bus where it wouldn't show and had a jolly good hunt for over an hour. And didn't find the damned thing at that! Then I got into the bus and drove on to the house. Naturally, everyone thought I'd just got back.'

'And you did not undeceive them?' asked Poirot sweetly.

'Well, that was pretty natural under the circumstances, don't you think?'

'I hardly agree,' said Poirot.

'Oh, come now—don't go looking for trouble—that's *my* motto! But you can't fasten anything on me. I never went into the courtyard, and you can't find any one who'll say I did.'

'That, of course, has been the difficulty,' said Poirot. 'The evidence of the servants that *no one entered the courtyard from outside*. But it occurred to me, upon reflection, that that was really *not* what they had said. They had sworn that *no stranger* had entered the premises. They had not been asked if a *member of the expedition* had done so.'

'Well, you ask them,' said Coleman. 'I'll eat my hat if they saw me or Carey either.'

'Ah! but that raises rather an interesting question. They would notice a *stranger* undoubtedly—but would they have even *noticed* a member of the expedition? The members of the staff are passing in and out all day. The servants would hardly notice their going and coming. It is possible, I think, that either Mr. Carey or Mr. Coleman *might* have entered and the servants' minds would have no remembrance of such an event.'

'Bunkum!' said Mr. Coleman.

Poirot went on calmly:

'Of the two, I think Mr. Carey was the least likely to be noticed going or coming. Mr. Coleman had started to Hassanieh in the car that morning and he would be expected to return in it. His arrival on foot would therefore be noticeable.'

'Of course it would!' said Coleman.

Richard Carey raised his head. His deep-blue eyes looked straight at Poirot.

'Are you accusing me of murder, M. Poirot?' he asked.

His manner was quite quiet but his voice had a dangerous undertone. Poirot bowed to him.

'As yet I am only taking you all on a journey—my journey towards the truth. I had now established one fact—that all the members of the expedition staff, and also Nurse Leatheran, could in actual *fact* have committed the murder. That there was very little likelihood of some of them having committed it was a secondary matter.

'I had examined *means* and *opportunity*. I next passed to *motive*. I discovered that *one and all of you could be credited with a motive!*'

'Oh! M. Poirot,' I cried. 'Not *me!* Why, I was a stranger. I'd only just come.'

'*Eh bien, ma soeur*, and was not that *just what Mrs. Leidner had been fearing? A stranger from outside?*'

'But—but—— Why, Dr. Reilly knew all about me! He suggested my coming!'

'How much did he really know about you? *Mostly what you yourself had told him.* Impostors have passed themselves off as hospital nurses before now.'

'You can write to St. Christopher's,' I began.

'For the moment will you silence yourself. Impossible to proceed while you conduct this argument. I do not say I suspect you *now*. All I say is that, keeping the open mind, you might quite easily be some one other than you pretended to be. There are many successful female impersonators, you know. Young William Bosner might be something of that kind.'

I was about to give him a further piece of my mind. Female impersonator indeed! But he raised his voice and hurried on with such an air of determination that I thought better of it.

'I am going now to be frank—brutally so. It is necessary. I am going to lay bare the underlying structure of this place.

'I examined and considered every single soul here. To begin with Dr. Leidner, I soon convinced myself that his love for his wife was the mainspring of his existence. He was a man torn and ravaged with grief. Nurse Leatheran I have already mentioned. If she were a female impersonator she was a most amazingly successful one, and I inclined to the belief that she was exactly what she said she was—a thoroughly competent hospital nurse.'

'Thank you for nothing,' I interposed.

'My attention was immediately attracted towards Mr. and Mrs. Mercado, who were both of them clearly in a state of great agitation and unrest. I considered first Mrs. Mercado. Was she capable of murder and if so for what reasons?

'Mrs. Mercado's physique was frail. At first sight it did not seem possible that she could have had the physical strength to strike down a woman like Mrs. Leidner with a heavy stone implement. If, however, Mrs. Leidner had been on her knees at the time, the thing would at least be *physically possible*. There are ways in which one woman can induce another to go down on her knees. Oh! not emotional ways! For instance, a woman might be turning up the hem of a skirt and ask another woman to put in the pins for her. The second woman would kneel on the ground quite unsuspectingly.

'But the motive? Nurse Leatheran had told me of the angry glances she had seen Mrs. Mercado direct at Mrs. Leidner. Mr. Mercado had evidently succumbed easily to Mrs. Leidner's spell. But I did not think the solution was to be found in mere jealousy. I was sure Mrs. Leidner was not in the least interested really in Mr. Mercado—and doubtless Mrs. Mercado was aware of the fact. She might be furious with her for the moment, but for *murder* there would have to be greater provocation. But Mrs. Mercado was essentially a fiercely maternal type. From the way she looked at her husband I realised, not only that she loved him, but that she would fight for him tooth and nail—and more than that—that *she envisaged the possibility of having to do so*. She was constantly on her guard and uneasy. The uneasiness was for him—not for herself. And when I studied Mr. Mercado I could make a fairly easy guess at what the trouble was. I took means to assure myself of the truth of my guess. Mr. Mercado was a drug addict—in an advanced stage of the craving.

'Now I need probably not tell you all that the taking of drugs over a long period has the result of considerably blunting the moral sense.

'Under the influence of drugs a man commits actions that he would not have dreamed of committing a few years earlier before he began the

practice. In some cases a man has committed murder—and it has been difficult to say whether he was wholly responsible for his actions or not. The law of different countries varies slightly on that point. The chief characteristic of the drug-fiend criminal is overweening confidence in his own cleverness.

‘I thought it possible that there was some discreditable incident, perhaps a criminal incident, in Mr. Mercado’s past which his wife had somehow or other succeeded in hushing up. Nevertheless his career hung on a thread. If anything of this past incident were bruited about, Mr. Mercado would be ruined. His wife was always on the watch. But there was Mrs. Leidner to be reckoned with. She had a sharp intelligence and a love of power. She might even induce the wretched man to confide in her. It would just have suited her peculiar temperament to feel she knew a secret which she could reveal at any minute with disastrous effects.

‘Here, then, was a possible motive for murder on the part of the Mercados. To protect her mate, Mrs. Mercado, I felt sure, would stick at nothing! Both she and her husband had had the opportunity—during that ten minutes when the courtyard was empty.’

Mrs. Mercado cried out, ‘It’s not *true*!’

Poirot paid no attention.

‘I next considered Miss Johnson. Was *she* capable of murder?

‘I thought she was. She was a person of strong will and iron self-control. Such people are constantly repressing themselves—and one day the dam bursts! But if Miss Johnson had committed the crime it could only be for some reason connected with Dr. Leidner. If in any way she felt convinced that Mrs. Leidner was spoiling her husband’s life, then the deep unacknowledged jealousy far down in her would leap at the chance of a plausible motive and give itself full rein.

‘Yes, Miss Johnson was distinctly a possibility.

‘Then there were the three young men.

‘First Carl Reiter. If, by any chance, one of the expedition staff was William Bosner, then Reiter was by far the most likely person. But if he *was* William Bosner, then he was certainly a most accomplished actor! If he were merely *himself*, had he any reason for murder?

‘Regarded from Mrs. Leidner’s point of view, Carl Reiter was far too easy a victim for good sport. He was prepared to fall on his face and worship immediately. Mrs. Leidner despised indiscriminating adoration—and the door-mat attitude nearly always brings out the worst side of a woman. In her treatment of Carl Reiter Mrs. Leidner displayed

really deliberate cruelty. She inserted a gibe here—a prick there. She made the poor young man's life a hell to him.'

Poirot broke off suddenly and addressed the young man in a personal, highly confidential manner.

'*Mon ami*, let this be a lesson to you. You are a *man*. Behave, then, like a *man*! It is against Nature for a man to grovel. Women and Nature have almost exactly the same reactions! Remember it is better to take the largest plate within reach and fling it at a woman's head than it is to wriggle like a worm whenever she looks at you!'

He dropped his private manner and reverted to his lecture style.

'Could Carl Reiter have been goaded to such a pitch of torment that he turned on his tormentor and killed her? Suffering does queer things to a man. I could not be *sure* that it was *not* so!'

'Next, William Coleman. His behaviour, as reported by Miss Reilly, is certainly suspicious. If he was the criminal it could only be because his cheerful personality concealed the hidden one of William Bosner. I do not think William Coleman, as William Coleman, has the temperament of a murderer. His faults might lie in another direction. Ah! perhaps Nurse Leatheran can guess what they would be?'

How *did* the man do it? I'm sure I didn't look as though I was thinking anything at all.

'It's nothing really,' I said, hesitating. 'Only if it's to be all truth, Mr. Coleman *did* say once himself that he would have made a good forger.'

'A good point,' said Poirot. 'Therefore if he had come across some of the old threatening letters, he could have copied them without difficulty.'

'Oy, oy, oy!' called out Mr. Coleman. 'This is what they call a frame up.'

Poirot swept on.

'As to his being or not being William Bosner such a matter is difficult of verification. But Mr. Coleman has spoken of a *guardian*—not of a father—and there is nothing definitely to veto the idea.'

'Tommyrot,' said Mr. Coleman. 'Why all of you listen to this chap beats me.'

'Of the three young men there remains Mr. Emmott,' went on Poirot. 'He again might be a possible shield for the identity of William Bosner. Whatever *personal* reasons he might have for the removal of Mrs. Leidner I soon realised that I should have no means of learning them from him. He could keep his own counsel remarkably well, and there

was not the least chance of provoking him nor of tricking him into betraying himself on any point. Of all the expedition he seemed to be the best and most dispassionate judge of Mrs. Leidner's personality. I think that he always knew her for exactly what she was—but what impression her personality made on him I was unable to discover. I fancy that Mrs. Leidner herself must have been provoked and angered by his attitude.

'I may say that of all the expedition, *as far as character and capability were concerned*, Mr. Emmott seemed to me the most fitted to bring a clever and well-timed crime off satisfactorily.'

For the first time Mr. Emmott raised his eyes from the toes of his boots.

'Thank you,' he said.

There seemed to be just a trace of amusement in his voice.

'The last two people on my list were Richard Carey and Father Lavigny.

'According to the testimony of Nurse Leatheran and others, Mr. Carey and Mrs. Leidner disliked each other. They were both civil with an effort. Another person, Miss Reilly, propounded a totally different theory to account for their attitude of frigid politeness.

'I soon had very little doubt that Miss Reilly's explanation was the correct one. I acquired my certitude by the simple expedient of provoking Mr. Carey into reckless and unguarded speech. It was not difficult. As I soon saw, he was in a state of high nervous tension. In fact he was—and is—very near a complete nervous breakdown. A man who is suffering up to the limit of his capacity can seldom put up much of a fight.

'Mr. Carey's barriers came down almost immediately. He told me, with a sincerity that I did not for a moment doubt, that he hated Mrs. Leidner.

'And he was undoubtedly speaking the truth. He *did* hate Mrs. Leidner. But *why* did he hate her?

'I have spoken of women who have a calamitous magic. But men have that magic too. There are men who are able without the least effort to attract women. What they call in these days *le sex appeal*! Mr. Carey had this quality very strongly. He was to begin with devoted to his friend and employer, and indifferent to his employer's wife. That did not suit Mrs. Leidner. She *must* dominate—and she set herself out to capture Richard Carey. But here, I believe, something entirely unforeseen took place. She herself, for perhaps the first time in her life, fell a victim to an overmastering passion. She fell in love—really in love—with Richard Carey.

‘And he—was unable to resist her. Here is the truth of the terrible state of nervous tension that he has been enduring. He has been a man torn by two opposing passions. He loved Louise Leidner—yes, but he also hated her. He hated her for undermining his loyalty to his friend. There is no hatred so great as that of a man who has been made to love a woman against his will.

‘I had here all the motive that I needed. I was convinced that *at certain moments* the most natural thing for Richard Carey to do would have been to strike with all the force of his arm at the beautiful face that had cast a spell over him.

‘All along I had felt sure that the murder of Louise Leidner was a *crime passionnel*. In Mr. Carey I had found an ideal murderer for that type of crime.

‘There remains one other candidate for the title of murderer—Father Lavigny. My attention was attracted to the good Father straight away by a certain discrepancy between his description of the strange man who had been seen peering in at the window and the one given by Nurse Leatheran. In all accounts given by different witnesses there is usually *some* discrepancy, but this was absolutely glaring. Moreover, Father Lavigny insisted on a certain characteristic—a squint—which ought to make identification much easier.

‘But very soon it became apparent that *while Nurse Leatheran’s description was substantially accurate*, Father Lavigny’s was *nothing of the kind*. It looked almost as though Father Lavigny was deliberately misleading us—as though he did *not want the man caught*.

‘But in that case *he must know something about this curious person*. He had been seen talking to the man but we had only his word for what they had been talking about.

‘What had the Iraqi been doing when Nurse Leatheran and Mrs. Leidner saw him? Trying to peer through the window—Mrs. Leidner’s window, so they thought, but I realised when I went and stood where they had been, that it might equally have been *the antika-room window*.

‘The night after that an alarm was given. Some one was in the antika-room. Nothing proved to have been taken, however. The interesting point to me is that when Dr. Leidner got there he found *Father Lavigny there before him*. Father Lavigny tells his story of seeing a light. *But again we have only his word for it*.

‘I begin to get curious about Father Lavigny. The other day when I make the suggestion that Father Lavigny may be Frederick Bosner Dr. Leidner pooh-poohs the suggestion. He says Father Lavigny is a well-

known man. I advance the supposition that Fredrick Bosner, who has had nearly twenty years to make a career for himself, under a new name, may very possibly *be* a well-known man by this time! All the same, I do not think that he has spent the intervening time in a religious community. A very much simpler solution presents itself.

'Did any one at the expedition know Father Lavigny be sight before he came? Apparently not. Why then should not it be *some one impersonating the good Father*? I found out that a telegram had been sent to Carthage on the sudden illness of Dr. Byrd, who was to have accompanied the expedition. To intercept a telegram, what could be easier? As to the work, there was no other epigraphist attached to the expedition. With a smattering of knowledge a clever man *might* bluff his way through. There had been very few tablets and inscriptions so far, and already I gathered that Father Lavigny's pronouncements had been felt to be somewhat unusual.

'It looked very much as though Father Lavigny were an *impostor*.

'But was he Frederick Bosner?

'Somehow affairs did not seem to be shaping themselves that way. The truth seemed likely to lie in quite a different direction.

'I had a lengthy conversation with Father Lavigny. I am a practising Catholic and I know many priests and members of religious communities. Father Lavigny struck me as not ringing quite true to his rôle. But he struck me, on the other hand, as familiar in quite a different capacity. I *had* met men of his type quite frequently—but they were not members of a religious community. Far from it!

'I began to send off telegrams.

'And then, unwittingly Nurse Leatheran gave me a valuable clue. We were examining the gold ornaments in the antika-room and she mentioned a trace of wax having been found adhering to a gold cup. Me, I say, "Wax?" and Father Lavigny, he said "Wax?" and his tone was enough! I knew in a flash exactly what he was doing here.'

Poirot paused and addressed himself directly to Dr. Leidner.

'I regret to tell you, monsieur, that the gold cup in the antika-room, the gold dagger, the hair ornaments and several other things *are not the genuine articles found by you*. They are very clever electro-types. Father Lavigny, I have just learned by this last answer to my telegrams, is none other than Raoul Menier, one of the cleverest thieves known to the French police. He specialises in thefts from museums of *objets d'art* and such like. Associated with him is Ali Yusuf, a semi-Turk, who is a first-class working jeweller. Our first knowledge of Menier was when certain

objects in the Louvre were found not to be genuine—in every case it was discovered that a distinguished archaeologist *not known previously by sight to the director* had recently had the handling of the spurious articles when paying a visit to the Louvre. On inquiry all these distinguished gentlemen denied having paid a visit to the Louvre at the times stated!

‘I have learned that Menier was in Tunis preparing the way for a theft from the Holy Fathers when your telegram arrived. Father Lavigny, who was in ill-health, was forced to refuse, but Menier managed to get hold of the telegram and substitute one of acceptance. He was quite safe in doing so. Even if the monks should read in some paper (in itself an unlikely thing) that Father Lavigny was in Iraq they would only think that the newspapers had got hold of a half truth as so often happens.

‘Menier and his accomplice arrived. The latter is seen when he is reconnoitring the antika-room from outside. The plan is for Father Lavigny to take wax impressions. Ali then makes clever duplicates. There are always certain collectors who are willing to pay a good price for genuine antiques and will ask no embarrassing questions. Father Lavigny will effect the substitution of the fake for the genuine article—preferably at night.

‘And that is doubtless what he was doing when Mrs. Leidner heard him and gave the alarm. What can he do? He hurriedly makes up a story of having seen a light in the antika-room.

‘That “went down,” as you say, very well. But Mrs. Leidner was no fool. She may have remembered the trace of wax she had noticed and then put two and two together. And if she did, what will she do then? Would it not be *dans son caractère* to do nothing at once, but to enjoy herself by letting hints slip to the discomfiture of Father Lavigny. She will let him see that she suspects—but not that she *knows*. It is, perhaps, a dangerous game, but she enjoys a dangerous game.

‘And perhaps she plays that game too long. Father Lavigny sees the truth, and strikes before she realises what he means to do.

‘Father Lavigny is Raoul Menier—a thief. Is he also—a *murderer*?’

Poirot paced the room. He took out a handkerchief, wiped his forehead and went on:

‘That was my position this morning. There were eight distinct possibilities and I did not know which of these possibilities was the right one. I still did not know *who was the murderer*.

‘But murder is a habit. The man or woman who kills once will kill again. And by the second murder, the murderer, was delivered into my hands.

'All along it was ever present in the back of my mind that some one of these people might have knowledge that they had kept back—knowledge incriminating the murderer.

'If so, that person would be in danger.

'My solicitude was mainly on account of Nurse Leatheran. She had an energetic personality and a brisk inquisitive mind. I was terrified of her finding out more than it was safe for her to know.

'As you all know, a second murder did take place. But the victim was not Nurse Leatheran—it was Miss Johnson.

'I like to think that I should have reached the correct solution anyway by pure reasoning, but it is certain that Miss Johnson's murder helped me to it much quicker.

'To begin with, one suspect was eliminated—Miss Johnson herself—for I did not for a moment entertain the theory of suicide.

'Let us examine now the facts of this second murder.

'Fact One: On Sunday evening Nurse Leatheran finds Miss Johnson in tears, and that same evening Miss Johnson burns a fragment of a letter which nurse believes to be in the same handwriting as that of the anonymous letters.

'Fact two: The evening before her death Miss Johnson is found by Nurse Leatheran standing on the roof in a state that nurse describes as one of incredulous horror. When nurse questions her she says, "I've seen how some one could come in from outside—and no one would ever guess." She won't say any more. Father Lavigny is crossing the courtyard and Mr. Reiter is at the door of the photographic-room.

'Fact three: Miss Johnson is found dying. The only words she can manage to articulate are "the window—the window——"

'Those are the facts, and these are the problems with which we are faced:

'What is the truth of the letters?

'What did Miss Johnson see from the roof?

'What did she mean by "the window—the window?"

'*Eh bien*, let us take the second problem first as the easiest of solution. I went up with Nurse Leatheran and I stood where Miss Johnson had stood. From there she could see the courtyard and the archway and the north side of the building and two members of the staff. Had her words anything to do with either Mr. Reiter or Father Lavigny?

'Almost at once a possible explanation leaped to my brain. If a stranger came in from *outside* he could only do so in *disguise*. And there was only *one* person whose general appearance lent itself into such an

impersonation. Father Lavigny! With a sun helmet, sun glasses, black bearded and a monk's long woollen robe, a stranger could pass in without the servants *realising* that a stranger had entered.

'Was *that* Miss Johnson's meaning? Or had she gone further? Did she realise that Father Lavigny's whole *personality* was a disguise. That he was some one other than he pretended to be?

'Knowing what I did know about Father Lavigny I was inclined to call the mystery solved. Raoul Menier was the murderer. He had killed Mrs. Leidner to silence her before she could give him away. Now *another person lets him see that she has penetrated his secret*. She, too, must be removed.

'And so everything is explained! The second murder. Father Lavigny's flight—minus robe and beard. (He and his friend are doubtless careering through Syria with excellent passports as two commercial travellers.) His action in placing the blood-stained quern under Miss Johnson's bed.

'As I say, I was almost satisfied—but not quite. For the perfect solution must explain *everything*—and this does not do so.

'It does not explain, for instance, why Miss Johnson should say "the window—the window," as she was dying. It does not explain her fit of weeping over the letter. It does not explain her mental attitude on the roof—her incredulous horror and her refusal to tell Nurse Leatheran what it was that *she now suspected or knew*.

'It was a solution that fitted the *outer* facts, but it did not satisfy the *psychological* requirements.

'And then, as I stood on the roof, going over in my mind those three points: the letters, the roof, the window, I *saw*—just as Miss Johnson had seen! *And this time what I saw explained everything!*'

CHAPTER XXVIII

JOURNEY'S END

POIROT LOOKED ROUND. Every eye was now fixed upon him. There had been a certain relaxation—a slackening of tension. Now the tension suddenly returned.

There was something coming . . . something . . .

Poirot's voice, quiet and unimpassioned, went on:

'The letters, the roof, "the window" . . . Yes, everything was explained—everything fell into place.

'I said just now that three men had alibis for the time of the crime. Two of those alibis I have shown to be worthless. I saw now my great—my amazing mistake. The third alibi was worthless too. Not only *could* Dr. Leidner have committed the murder—but I was convinced that he *had* committed it.'

There was a silence, a bewildered uncomprehending silence. Dr. Leidner said nothing. He seemed lost in his far-away world still. David Emmott, however, stirred uneasily and spoke.

'I don't know what you mean to imply, M. Poirot. I told you that Dr. Leidner never left the roof until at least a quarter to three. That is the absolute truth. I swear it solemnly. I am not lying. And it would have been quite impossible for him to have done so without my seeing him.'

Poirot nodded.

'Oh, I believe you. *Dr. Leidner did not leave the roof.* That is an undisputed fact. But what I saw—and what Miss Johnson had seen—was *that Dr. Leidner could murder his wife from the roof without leaving it.*'

We all stared.

'The *window*,' cried Poirot. '*Her window!* That is what I realised—just as Miss Johnson realised it. Her window was directly underneath, on the side away from the courtyard. And Dr. Leidner was alone up there with no one to witness his actions. And those heavy stone querns and grinders were up there all ready to his hand. So simple, so very simple, granted one thing—that *the murderer had the opportunity to move the body before any one else saw it.* . . . Oh, it is beautiful—of an unbelievable simplicity!

'Listen—it went like this:

'Dr. Leidner is on the roof working with the pottery. He calls you up, Mr. Emmott, and while he holds you in talk he notices that, as usually happens, the small boy takes advantage of your absence to leave his work and go outside the courtyard. He keeps you with him ten minutes, then he lets you go and as soon as you are down below shouting to the boy he sets his plan in operation.

'He takes from his pocket the plasticine smeared mask with which he has already scared his wife on a former occasion and dangles it over the edge of the parapet till it taps on his wife's window.

'That, remember, is the window giving on the countryside facing the opposite direction to the courtyard.

'Mrs. Leidner is lying on her bed half asleep. She is peaceful and happy. Suddenly the mask begins tapping on the window and attracts her attention. But it is not dusk now—it is broad daylight—there is

nothing terrifying about it. She recognises it for what it is—a crude form of trickery! She is not frightened but indignant. She does what any other woman would do in her place. Jumps off the bed, opens the window, passes her head through the bars and turns her face upwards to see who is playing the trick on her.

‘Dr. Leidner is waiting. He has in his hands, poised and ready, a heavy quern. At the psychological moment *he drops it*. . . .

‘With a faint cry (heard by Miss Johnson) Mrs. Leidner collapses on the rug underneath the window.

‘Now there is a hole in this quern, and through that Dr. Leidner had previously passed a cord. He has now only to haul in the cord and bring up the quern. He replaces the latter neatly, bloodstained side down, amongst the other objects of that kind on the roof.

‘Then he continues his work for an hour or more till he judges the moment has come for the second act. He descends the stairs, speaks to Mr. Emmott and Nurse Leatheran, crosses the courtyard and enters his wife’s room. This is the explanation he himself gives of his movements there.

“‘*I saw my wife’s body in a heap by the bed. For a moment or two I felt paralysed as though I couldn’t move. Then at last I went and knelt down by her and lifted up her head. I saw she was dead. . . . At last I got up. I felt dazed and as though I were drunk. I managed to get to the door and call out.*”

‘A perfectly possible account of the actions of a grief-dazed man. Now listen to what I believe to be the truth. Dr. Leidner enters the room, hurries to the window, and having pulled on a pair of gloves, closes and fastens it, then picks up his wife’s body and transports it to a position between the bed and the door. Then he notices a slight stain on the window-side rug. He cannot change it with the other rug, they are a different size, but he does the next best thing. He puts the stained rug in front of the wash-stand and the rug from the wash-stand under the window. *If the stain is noticed, it will be connected with the wash-stand—not with the window—a very important point.* There must be no suggestion that the window played any part in the business. Then he comes to the door and acts the part of the overcome husband, and that, I imagine, is not difficult. For he *did* love his wife.’

‘My good man,’ cried Dr. Reilly impatiently, ‘if he loved her why did he kill her? Where’s the motive? Can’t you speak, Leidner? Tell him he’s mad.’

Dr. Leidner neither spoke nor moved.

Poirot said:

'Did I not tell you all along that this was a *crime passionnel*? Why did her first husband, Frederick Bosner, threaten to kill her? Because he loved her. . . . And in the end, you see, he made his boast good. . . .

'Mais oui—mais oui—once I realise that it is Dr. Leidner who did the killing everything falls into place. . . .

'For the second time I recommence my journey from the beginning—Mrs. Leidner's first marriage—the threatening letters—her second marriage. The letters prevented her marrying any other man—but they did not prevent her marrying Dr. Leidner. How simple that is—if Dr. Leidner is actually Frederick Bosner.

'Once more let us start our journey—from the point of view this time of young Frederick Bosner.

'To begin with he loves his wife Louise with an overpowering passion such as only a woman of her kind can evoke. She betrays him. He is sentenced to death. He escapes. He is involved in a railway accident but he manages to emerge with a second personality—that of a young Swedish archaeologist, Eric Leidner, whose body is badly disfigured and who will be conveniently buried as Frederick Bosner.

'What is the new Eric Leidner's attitude to the woman who was willing to send him to his death? First and most important, *he still loves her*. He sets to work to build up his new life. He is a man of great ability, his profession is congenial to him and he makes a success of it. *But he never forgets the ruling passion of his life*. He keeps himself informed of his wife's movements. Of one thing he is cold-bloodedly determined (remember Mrs. Leidner's own description of him to Nurse Leatheran—gentle and kind but ruthless), *she shall belong to no other man*. Whenever he judges it necessary he despatches a letter. He imitates some of the peculiarities of her handwriting in case she should think of taking his letters to the police. Women who write sensational anonymous letters to themselves are such a common phenomenon that the police will be sure to jump to that solution given the likeness of the handwriting. At the same time he leaves her in doubt as to whether he is really alive or not.

'At last, after many years, he judges that the time has arrived; he re-enters her life. All goes well. His wife never dreams of his real identity. He is a well-known man. The upstanding, good-looking young fellow is now a middle-aged man with a beard and stooping shoulders. And so we see history repeating itself. As before, Frederick is able to dominate Louise. For the second time she consents to marry him. *And no letter comes to forbid the banns*.

'But afterwards a letter does come. Why?

'I think that Dr. Leidner was taking no chances. The intimacy of marriage *might* awaken a memory. He wishes to impress on his wife, once and for all, *that Eric Leidner and Frederick Bosner are two different people*. So much so that a threatening letter comes from the former on account of the latter. The rather puerile gas poisoning business follows—arranged by Dr. Leidner, of course. Still with the same object in view. After that he is satisfied. No more letters need come. They can settle down to happy married life together.

'And then, after nearly two years, *the letters recommence*.

'Why? *Eh bien*, I think I know. *Because the threat underlying the letters was always a genuine threat*. (That is why Mrs. Leidner has always been frightened. She *knew* her Frederick's gentle but ruthless nature.) *If she belongs to any other man but him he would kill her. And she has given herself to Richard Carey*.

'And so, having discovered this, cold-bloodedly, calmly, Dr. Leidner prepares the scene for murder.

'You see now the important part played by Nurse Leatheran? Dr. Leidner's rather curious conduct (it puzzled me at the very first) in securing her services for his wife is explained. It was vital that a reliable professional witness should be able to state incontrovertibly that Mrs. Leidner had been dead *over an hour* when her body was found—that is that she had been killed at a time when *everybody could swear her husband was on the roof*. A suspicion *might* have arisen that he had killed her when he entered the room and found the body—but that was out of the question when a trained hospital nurse would assert positively that she had already been dead an hour.

'Another thing that is explained is the curious state of tension and strain that had come over the expedition this year. I never from the first thought that that could be attributed solely to Mrs. Leidner's influence. For several years this particular expedition had had a reputation for happy good-fellowship. In my opinion the state of mind of a community is always directly due to the influence of the man at the top. Dr. Leidner, quiet though he was, was a man of great personality. It was due to his tact, to his judgment, to his sympathetic manipulation of human beings that the atmosphere had always been such a happy one.

'If there was a change, therefore, the change must be due to the man at the top—in other words to Dr. Leidner. It was *Dr. Leidner*, not Mrs. Leidner, who was responsible for the tension and uneasiness. No wonder the staff felt the change without understanding it. The kindly genial Dr. Leidner, outwardly the same, was only playing the part of

himself. The real man was an obsessed fanatic plotting to kill.

‘And now we will pass on to the second murder—that of Miss Johnson. In tidying up Dr. Leidner’s papers in the office (a job she took on herself unasked, craving for something to do) she must have come on some unfinished draft of one of the anonymous letters.

‘It must have been both incomprehensible and extremely upsetting to her! Dr. Leidner has been deliberately terrorising his wife! She cannot understand it—but it upsets her badly. It is in this mood that Nurse Leatheran discovers her crying.

‘I do not think at the moment that she suspected Dr. Leidner of being the murderer, but my experiments with sounds in Mrs. Leidner’s and Father Lavigny’s rooms are not lost upon her. She realises that if it was Mrs. Leidner’s cry she heard, *the window in her room must have been open, not shut*. At the moment that conveys nothing vital to her, *but she remembers it*.

‘Her mind goes on working—ferreting its way towards the truth. Perhaps she makes some reference to the letters which Dr. Leidner understands and his manner changes. She may see that he is, suddenly, afraid. But Dr. Leidner *cannot* have killed his wife! He was on the *roof* all the time.

‘And then, one evening, as she herself is on the roof puzzling about it, the truth comes to her in a flash. Mrs. Leidner has been killed from up *here*, through the open window.

‘It was at that minute that Nurse Leatheran found her.

‘And immediately, her old affection reasserting itself, she puts up a quick camouflage. Nurse Leatheran must not guess the horrifying discovery she has just made.

‘She looks deliberately in the opposite direction (towards the courtyard) and makes a remark suggested to her by Father Lavigny’s appearance as he crosses the courtyard.

‘She refuses to say more. She has got to “think things out.”

‘And Dr. Leidner, who has been watching her anxiously, *realises that she knows the truth*. She is not the kind of woman to conceal her horror and distress from him.

‘It is true that as yet she has not given him away—but how long can he depend upon her?

‘Murder is a habit. That night he substitutes a glass of acid for her glass of water. There is just a chance she may be believed to have deliberately poisoned herself. There is even a chance she may be considered to have done the first murder and has now been overcome with remorse.

To strengthen the latter idea he takes the quern from the roof and puts it under her bed.

'No wonder that poor Miss Johnson, in her death agony, could only try desperately to impart her hard-won information. Through "the window," *that* is how Mrs. Leidner was killed, *not* through the door—through the *window*. . . .

'And so thus, everything is explained, everything falls into place. . . . Psychologically perfect.

'But there is no proof. . . . No proof at all. . . .'

None of us spoke. We were lost in a sea of horror . . . Yes, and not only horror. Pity, too.

Dr. Leidner had neither moved nor spoken. He sat just as he had done all along. A tired, worn elderly man.

At last he stirred slightly and looked at Poirot with gentle tired eyes.

'No,' he said, 'there is no proof. But that does not matter. You knew that I would not deny truth . . . I have never denied truth . . . I think—really—I am rather glad . . . I'm so tired . . .'

Then he said simply:

'I'm sorry about Anne. That was bad—senseless—it wasn't *me* ! And she suffered, too, poor soul. Yes, that wasn't me. It was fear. . . .'

A little smile just hovered on his pain-twisted lips.

'You would have made a good archaeologist, M. Poirot. You have the gift of *rè-creating* the past.

'It was all very much as you said.

'I loved Louise and I killed her . . . If you'd known Louise you'd have understood. . . . No, I think you understand anyway. . . .'

CHAPTER XXIX

L'ENVOI

THERE ISN'T REALLY any more to say about things.

They got 'Father' Lavigny and the other man just as they were going on board a steamer at Beyrouth.

Sheila Reilly married young Emmott. I think that will be good for her. He's no door-mat—he'll keep her in her place. She'd have ridden roughshod over poor Bill Coleman.

I nursed him, by the way, when he had appendicitis a year ago. I got

quite fond of him. His people were sending him out to farm in South Africa.

I've never been out East again. It's funny—sometimes I wish I could. I think of the noise the water-wheel made and the women washing, and that queer haughty look that camels give you—and I get quite a homesick feeling. After all, perhaps dirt isn't really so unhealthy as one is brought up to believe!

Dr. Reilly usually looks me up when he's in England, and as I said, it's he who's got me into this. 'Take it or leave it,' I said to him. 'I know the grammar's all wrong and it's not properly written or anything like that—but there it is.'

And he took it. Made no bones about it. It will give me a queer feeling if it's ever printed.

M. Poirot went back to Syria and about a week later he went home on the Orient Express and got himself mixed up in another murder. He was clever, I don't deny it, but I shan't forgive him in a hurry for pulling my leg the way he did. Pretending to think I might be mixed up in the crime and not a real hospital nurse at all!

Doctors are like that sometimes. Will have their joke, some of them will, and never think of *your* feelings!

I've thought and thought about Mrs. Leidner and what she was really like. . . . Sometimes it seems to me she was just a terrible woman—and other times I remember how nice she was to me and how soft her voice was—and her lovely fair hair and everything—and I feel that perhaps, after all, she was more to be pitied than blamed. . . .

And I can't help but pity Dr. Leidner. I know he was a murderer twice over, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. He was so dreadfully fond of her. It's awful to be fond of any one like that.

Somehow, the more I get older, and the more I see of people and sadness and illness and everything, the sorrier I get for every one. Sometimes, I declare, I don't know what's become of the good strict principles my aunt brought me up with. A very religious woman she was, and most particular. There wasn't one of our neighbours whose faults she didn't know backwards and forwards. . . .

Oh, dear, it's quite true what Dr. Reilly said. How does one stop writing? If I could find a really good telling phrase.

I must ask Dr. Reilly for some Arab one.

Like the one M. Poirot used.

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate . . .

Something like that.



